

**'OTHER' LITERATURES AND  
ISSUES IN CRITICISM, THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY:  
(RE)INTRODUCING A CRITICAL DISCOURSE  
ON 'CHILD LITERATURE'**

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This thesis is my own original work and all sources have been acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katharine Jones', with a stylized, cursive script.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to place both what is conventionally called 'children's literature' and the critical discourse on that literature in a broader context by working through some central issues in contemporary criticism, theory and philosophy. My thesis therefore takes a much wider scope than might be expected of a study of child literature and child literature criticism. In ranging through the theories of F. R. Leavis, Edmund Husserl, Stanley Fish, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, Richard Bernstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jane Flax and others, my study may appear to some to be moving away from child literature and child literature criticism. However, this is exactly the viewpoint I want to challenge and open up to further question. Debates and developments in broader theory and philosophy (phenomenology, poststructuralism, feminism) have clearly influenced child literature criticism but that criticism also forms a part of these developments and debates. Hence, the title of this study highlights what 'other' literatures and their critical discourses, such as child literature and its critical discourse, have both to bring to and to gain from broader literature and its critical discourse.

The highly critically acclaimed child literature of Alan Garner and the immensely popular child literature of Roald Dahl, and the critical discourse on that work, provide a case study for this thesis. Such a study is significant and timely given the place that these two authors hold in contemporary child literature.

My study takes as its starting-point, in reintroducing a critical discourse on child literature, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rose's work offers a significantly different way of reading child literature, in focusing on the adults' 'investment' in 'the child', that has been largely neglected, dismissed or misappropriated by critics. However, I also want to develop Rose's position further and argue for the introduction of a critical discourse that addresses a number of difficulties with her approach. In particular, I want to bring into dialogue the work of Rose, other child literature critics, and critics and theorists in general to open up thinking space. The point of this thesis is to emphasise and map out a dialogic approach – although one that is always undercut by a rhetoric of disruption – in order to move towards a more critical and comprehensive child literature criticism and theory. The terms 'child literature' and 'child literature criticism' therefore serve the difficult task of both critique and continuing the conversation about the genre and its criticism.

Child literature and child literature criticism are excellent sites for exploring the kinds of questions that have concerned broader criticism, theory and philosophy, as well as for raising many important new questions.

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## Introduction

This thesis sets out to explore five questions that have signalled to me the need for the (re)introduction of a critical discourse based around the notion of an 'adults' child literature' and a more comprehensive and critical account of the concepts of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers.<sup>1</sup> These five questions are:

What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse have been privileged by critics?

What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics? What might be the disparity between critics' acknowledged (stated) wants and their unspoken (unexamined) wants? What might be critics' 'investment' here?

What merits inquiry in the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that inform the major critical approaches to child literature?

What have different critics said about child readers' experiences of literature and how are their claims to knowledge about these experiences derived?

What have different critics said about the reality of 'the child'/children and how are their claims to knowledge about this reality derived?<sup>2</sup>

To fully explore these questions, this thesis engages not only with shifts in child literature theory but also with developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy, looking at what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform these developments and their influence on child literature theory.

My discussion therefore takes a much wider scope than might be expected of a study of child literature and child literature criticism. In ranging through the theories of F. R. Leavis, Edmund Husserl, Stanley Fish, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jane Flax and others, my thesis may appear to some to be moving away from these concerns: what have Rorty and Gadamer, for example, got to do with child literature and child literature criticism? However, this is exactly the viewpoint that I want to engage with and open up for question. Debates and

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<sup>1</sup> While this construction is somewhat clumsy, it draws attention to and clarifies child literature critics' dual interest in *children* and *readers* (this interest in issues of readers and reading links child literature criticism with broader criticism and theory).

<sup>2</sup> I will refer to the 'reality of children' in my thesis but this terminology encompasses notions of '*realities* of children'.

developments in broader theory and philosophy (phenomenology, poststructuralism, feminism) have clearly influenced child literature criticism but that criticism also forms a part of these developments and debates. Further, in exploring what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform child literature theory, it is impossible to quarantine the assumptions that inform broader theory and philosophy from similar inquiry.

The purpose of this study then is to place what is conventionally called 'children's literature' and the critical discourse on that literature in a broader context by working through some central issues in contemporary criticism, theory and philosophy: language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers.

It is important to clarify my use of the term 'child literature' as opposed to 'children's literature'. The term 'children's literature' is ambiguous. Is it literature written by the child or literature given to the child? Of course, 'children's literature' is conventionally defined as the latter, as that written *for* children. This definition is reflected in the title of a highly respected, standard text in the field, John Rowe Townsend's *Written for Children: An Outline of English Language Children's Literature*.<sup>3</sup> As I will discuss in this thesis, however, the expression 'written for children' is itself ambiguous. Instead of using the term 'children's literature' then, I have coined the term 'adults' child literature' or, more simply, 'child literature', to clarify that this is a literature written (almost entirely) by adults that assumes various conceptions of 'the child', 'childhood' and 'the child-like' with child readers being (usually) the target of the book.

Rather than surveying a range of child texts and associated critical commentaries – which authors? which texts? which critics? – this thesis will base its case on two major authors of English language child literature, Alan Garner and Roald Dahl, and on critics who have written at some length on Garner's and Dahl's work.

For different reasons, Garner and Dahl emerge as the major authors of contemporary English language child literature of the last thirty years:<sup>4</sup> on the one hand, the most critically discussed and acclaimed author – "Garner, who has some claim to be the major twentieth-century English author for children"<sup>5</sup> – and, on the other hand, the most

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<sup>3</sup> First published in 1965, Townsend's study has been revised over several editions, culminating in a fourth revised edition in 1992.

<sup>4</sup> The process used to identify Garner as the most critically discussed and acclaimed author and Dahl as the most popular author of English language child literature over the last thirty years (1960–1991) is outlined in Appendix A. This period was taken as a representative one in that it marks the publication date of Garner's first book, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), and the publication date of Dahl's last book, *Minpins* (1991; posthumous). A full list of child books by Garner and Dahl is in Appendix B.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 138. Jacqueline Rose also observes that Garner is considered to be "one of the most innovative writers

popular author of child literature: "[in 1989] Dahl, the world's most successful children's author ... sold 2.3 million books in paperback in Britain alone".<sup>6</sup> This finding is of significance not because it establishes Garner and Dahl as the most important authors of contemporary child literature (other authors would have been singled out if the sample period had been child literature published over the last five years rather than the last thirty) or because their work is most representative of contemporary child literature but because it establishes Garner and Dahl as two very *different* authors. It is the difference between these two authors' works that is significant because it has tended to polarise critical opinion. This brings into greater prominence the assumptions informing critics' discourse, and the different images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its discourse that are privileged by these critics.

Part One of this thesis traces a number of past developments in literary criticism.

Chapter 1 examines critical discourse on the works of Garner and Dahl over the period 1969–1977, a period characterised by a separation between what has been termed "book-centred" and "child-centred" criticism.<sup>7</sup> The date 1969 was chosen because it marked the publication of *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, a text that provides an early representative statement of the book-centred critical position:

[o]ur primary aim has been to find selections that deal with children's literature as an essential part of the whole realm of literary activity, to be discussed in the same terms and judged by the same standards that would apply to any other branch of writing. We do not subscribe to the view that the criticism of children's books calls for the adoption of a special scale of values.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the date 1977 marks the publication of *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*, a work that provides a representative statement of the child-centred critical position:

[i]t would be difficult to justify another collection of essays such as this, unless it opened up a way forward from the minority cult which children's literature can so easily become if the authors and the critics ... lose sight of the readers. The adult's response and the child's cannot be the same<sup>9</sup> ... Our chief concern here is to focus

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today", *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 9. See also Townsend: "Garner has long been one of the most discussed of contemporary British writers for children ... All short-lists of leading child authors include his name: a name which carries with it associations of high esteem and exceptional brilliance", "Alan Garner", *A Sounding of Storytellers: New and Revised Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children* (London: Penguin, 1979).

6 Georgie Greig, "Roald's Gift Makes Him Dyslexic Kid's Dahl-ing", *The Weekend Australian*, 27–28 October 1990, p. 7.

7 The terms "book people" and "child people" were first used by Townsend: "[in] 1968, I coined a phrase about 'book people' and 'child people' ... This division was useful in a way, because it helped to account for two diametrically opposed views of the state of English children's literature", "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature", rpt. in *Signal*, 14 (1974), p. 97.

8 *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, eds. Sheila Egoff, G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley, 1st ed, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. xv.

9 *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*, eds. Margaret Meek, et al. (London: Bodley

on the reader and to ask about the nature of his experience ... We have emphasized the point that, although it is possible to judge books for children by what are called 'adult standards' and regard them as part of literature, the young reader carries a different world in his head, no less complex than an adult's but differently organised. (p. 11)

Chapter 2 turns to broader developments in child literature criticism (still marked by the book-centred/child-centred divide) and in literary criticism in general to explore the assumptions that inform these developments. While these terms – book-centred and child-centred – have been widely accepted as a way of classifying the different critical approaches to child literature over this period,<sup>10</sup> they are, as I will discuss, confusing and misleading.

There are many statements of the book-centred critical position, Townsend providing a good example: "children's books must be judged as part of literature in general, and therefore by much the same standards as 'adult' books".<sup>11</sup> The standards adopted from the literary criticism of adult books by book-centred critics over this period centre on the 'literary merit' of the text: "in criticism", Townsend states, "there is no criterion except literary merit".<sup>12</sup> My argument here is not so much with this approach as it is with the way 'literary merit' is defined. Under the banner of upholding a *literary* criticism, book-centred critics sought to exclude certain texts and certain critical approaches, such as those that brought child readership into focus. Child-centred criticism was regarded not only as irrelevant to literary criticism but as inherently flawed. Brian Alderson, for example, observed that, while some people might object that "to assess children's books without reference to children is to erect some absolute critical standard relating neither to the author's purpose nor to the reader's enjoyment", to do much less "is to follow a road that leads to a morass of contradictions and subjective responses".<sup>13</sup> In focusing on child readers' responses to the text, the child-centred approach threatened to corrupt what were clearly regarded by book-centred critics as 'established' (literary) standards of excellence.

Child-centred criticism encompasses a much smaller body of writing than book-centred criticism, reflecting its position outside of the 'mainstream'. 'Children's literature', as it

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Head, 1977), p. 4. Further references will be in the text.

- 10 On these developments in child literature criticism, see Hunt, "Children's Books, Children's Literature, Criticism and Research", in *Approaches to Research in Children's Literature*, ed. Michael Benton (Southampton: University of Southampton, 1980), pp. 18-19, and Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, "The Relevance of the Child to the Criticism of Children's Literature", *Review Bulletin*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1988), pp. 24-32.
- 11 *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1983), p. 13.
- 12 "Didacticism in Modern Dress", rpt. in *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 2nd ed, eds. Sheila Egoff, G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 62.
- 13 "The Irrelevance of Children to the Children's Book Reviewer"; quoted in Townsend's "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature", p. 98.



was then conceived by book-centred critics, was regarded as something of a contradiction by child-centred critics. The 'best children's books' (in theory at least) were instead those that child readers regarded as good. As Elaine Moss states, "the assumption that only the literary book was worth consideration, the neglect of the learning, perhaps non-literary, child sowed the seeds of the polarity – pure [book-centred] criticism versus child-oriented comment".<sup>14</sup>

As I have suggested, a rejection of the reader – in a theoretical sense at least – was at the heart of the book-centred critical project. There are many statements of this position among the book-centred critics (I quote here from Peter Hunt):

[w]hatever critical theory we produce for children's literature, it will have little or nothing to do with children. Thus we may say, Book X is literature (as opposed to reading matter), or Book Y is good literature (as opposed to not-so-good) regardless of whether children actually read it, or like it, or buy it.<sup>15</sup>

However this point of view was as widely held in theory as it was ignored in practice. As I will discuss in Chapters 1 and 2, it becomes clear that, rather than dismissing child readers from the critical process, they are very much the focus of book-centred critics' concerns. I will therefore argue that book-centred critics have sought to hide behind the concept of the "critical adult" in order to conceal their interest in child readers (other terms used by such critics being the "informed" adult and the "discriminating" adult).<sup>16</sup>

Like book-centred criticism, child-centred rhetoric also betrays its own self-division. While the 'best' children's books are regarded as those with popular appeal (books that child readers regard as good), it is clear that, in practice, child-centred critics also wanted to have a say about literary standards. In trying to strike a balance between 'literary standards of excellence' and accessibility to the largest number of children, however, child-centred critics not only called into the question the assumptions that then informed the concept of 'literary merit' but also the assumptions that informed their own appeal to child readers' responses. What becomes very unclear in child-centred discourse is just who is responsible for the privileging of certain texts over others – child readers or the child-centred critic – and what criteria are being used. In this way, I will argue that child-centred critics have similarly obscured their involvement in the evaluation of texts, as well as their interest in 'the child' – in this case by hiding behind the concept of the "non-

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<sup>14</sup> *Part of the Pattern: A Personal Journey through the World of Children's Books, 1960-1985* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> "Criticism and Children's Literature", *Signal*, 15 (1974), p. 119. As I will discuss, Hunt's approach to child literature has changed markedly over time.

<sup>16</sup> The term "critical adult" is used by Eleanor Cameron in "*The Owl Service: A Study*", *Wilson Library Bulletin*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1969), p. 425. The other terms are used by Townsend, "Standards of Criticism", p. 101 and Hunt, "Criticism and Children's Literature", p. 127, respectively.

literary" child reader.<sup>17</sup> What the child-centred critic wants is innocent because it appears to be simply what 'the child reader' wants. The impression conveyed is that the adult is liberating child readers, giving them a greater say in what they read and how books are assessed.

The question Part One therefore provokes is whether we can arrive at a literature that is more *for* children. It is here that I want to pick up the discussion on contemporary developments in critical theory on child literature.

Part Two traces a number of contemporary developments in critical theory. These developments offer different ways of looking at texts and (child) readers, effectively dismantling the opposition between book- and child-centred criticism. As before, the opening chapter of Part Two acts as a case study, examining critical discourse on the works of Garner and Dahl over the period 1977–1997. The date 1977 marks the publication of Aidan Chambers' "The Reader in the Book".<sup>18</sup> This essay has been perceived as a landmark in critical theory on child literature in shifting away from the book-centred/child-centred divide.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 4 turns to broader developments in child literature theory and in theory and philosophy in general to explore the assumptions that inform these developments.

Part Two reaches the preliminary conclusion that many contemporary critics of child literature have hidden behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader'.<sup>20</sup> To return then to the question I asked above – can we arrive at a literature that is more *for* children? – a number of contemporary critics of child literature have suggested that we can; that we can arrive at a literature that is *of* the child, that belongs *to* the child. Hunt features prominently in contemporary criticism and theory on child literature.<sup>21</sup> In expounding

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17 This term was used by Moss, as quoted above (see footnote 14).

18 "The Reader in the Book", rpt. in *The Signal Approach to Children's Books*, eds. Nancy Chambers (Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1980), pp. 250–275.

19 Peggy Whalen-Levitt, for example, states that child literature critics are "indebted" to Chambers for "bridging the gap" between contemporary critical theory and the study of child literature: "[t]o embrace a theoretical framework that enables us to consider author, text, and reader is to resolve a longstanding impasse in our field ... In the past, neither a child-centred nor a text-centred approach has served us well", "Pursuing 'The Reader in the Book'", rpt. in *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*, ed. Robert Bator (Chicago: American Library Association, 1983), p. 136. Hunt also observes that this was one of the first essays to "acknowledge developments in critical theory" and that it "remains a distinctive landmark in criticism", *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, ed. Hunt (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 90. Chambers' essay won the Children's Literature Association's first award for critical writing.

20 This term recalls a phrase used by Hunt, as quoted below (see footnote 22).

21 Hunt has recently written/edited five key texts in the area: *International Companion Encyclopedia on Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996); *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992); *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*; and *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*.

what he calls "childist criticism", Hunt states:

[u]ntil we have an attitude of mind (and criticism) that not only wishes to expand and liberate the child reader but also attempts to understand that this cannot be done by the mixture-as-before, we will not really have children's fiction at all: only adultist writing, and adultist writing-about.<sup>22</sup>

Can we then, perhaps through Hunt's 'childist' approach, arrive at a truly '*children's* fiction', a fiction that is more *for* children? Central to my argument in Part Two is the belief that there can be no satisfactory answer to this question. In this way, I agree with Rose that "children's fiction is impossible – not in the sense that it cannot be written (for that would be nonsense) but in that it hangs upon an impossibility ... the impossible relation between the adult and the child".<sup>23</sup> Rose's study offers a significantly different way of reading child literature that, as I will discuss, has been largely neglected, dismissed or misappropriated by critics.<sup>24</sup> However, while I have taken Rose's study as my starting-point in *reintroducing* a critical discourse on child literature, I have identified a number of difficulties with her position and want to develop her argument much further to argue for the *introduction* of a critical discourse that goes beyond her approach.

Having made a preliminary assessment of contemporary child critical theory, Part Two points to the need for further exploration of contemporary/poststructuralist developments in such theory and in broader theory and philosophy. In this way, Part Three seeks to develop a more comprehensive and critical account of the issues central to this thesis.

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It is against this background then, that Parts One through Three work through the five questions I earlier outlined. The first of these questions considers what images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse have been privileged by critics. The second question considers what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics. To use Rose's terms, this is to ask what might be adults' "investment" in the concept of 'the child' and in the child literature and critical discourse that underpin that concept, to ask what might adults "want".<sup>25</sup>

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22 "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", *Signal*, no. 45 (1984), p. 185.

23 *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 1. Further references will be in the text.

24 The significance of Rose's work is starting to be recognised. See Meek, "Rose's examination of the textual conditions of *Peter Pan*, the new tone of this criticism and the different paths she follows have opened up a number of possibilities for the theoretical consideration of children's books", "Introduction", *The International Companion Encyclopedia on Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, p. 11. Similarly, Jo-Anne Wallace talks of this as Rose's "brilliant" but "unfortunately" least read book", "Technologies of 'the Child': Towards a Theory of the Child-Subject", *Textual Practice*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1995), p. 294.

25 "When we think about childhood, it is above all our investment in doing so which counts (p. 12) ... Instead of asking what children want, or need, from literature, this book has asked what it is

To suggest that adults have an investment in the concept of the child (an interest or something at stake) is hardly to say anything new or radical. Whether because of biological programming, or a psychological investment in the unfinished business of childhood, or because part of being human is that we want to ensure the continuance in the next generation of what matters most from our social, cultural, ethical and political values, it is inevitable that adults will have an interest in the child.<sup>26</sup> This is something that has been accepted by contemporary critics of child literature. John Stephens' recent study, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, is grounded on the premise that what child books have in common is "an impulse to intervene in the lives of children. That is, children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience".<sup>27</sup> Perry Nodelman has made a similar observation: "children's books ... represent childhood within the context of adult views of what it is or should be and of how it is significant. In other words ... they colonize their readers".<sup>28</sup>

While contemporary child literature critics acknowledge that adults have an investment in the concept of the child and, as a result, generally adopt a more searching position on that investment than book- and child-centred critics, I have particular difficulties with their discourse on the *nature* of that investment. As I will discuss, most child literature critics have pointed (whether directly or implicitly) to what they perceive to be some of the repressive aspects of that investment, as evident in certain child books and critical commentaries, that is, to draw attention to repressive images of the child and repressive characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse. In turn, however, such critics have tended to assume that the characteristics of child literature and its discourse they have privileged are liberating and therefore amount to an 'innocent' investment in the child. In this way, critics' investment in the child is neutralised and effectively erased until, of course, its perceived repressive tendencies are in turn uncovered and critiqued at some later point in time. This is not to suggest that ethical/political critique itself is the problem here but to highlight that there is frequently an *under-engagement* with the complexity of ethical/political issues in contemporary theory.

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that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child" (Rose, p. 137).

26 Karín Lesnik-Oberstein observes, for example, that adults "do not have the option of withdrawing from their positions of power and responsibility with respect to children: their absence would, in that case, only constitute another form of use of power". While there are problems with this control, "it provides the only means of protection and nurturing", *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 28.

27 *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 8.

28 "Never Going to be Persuaded: A Response to 'Never Going Home'", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1993), p. 43.

Both Hunt and Stephens privilege a child literature that is, in Hunt's words, "open" and "experimental"<sup>29</sup> and, in Stephen's words, "intertextual" and "interrogative".<sup>30</sup> The impression created by them is that child literature can, by a conscious reduction in the controls placed on the text by adults, approach closer to a literature *for* the child: the 'open' text is benign because it seeks to liberate child readers. In adopting such a position, both critics fall into a number of traps, including suggesting that 'open' texts are somehow closer to the culture of childhood and automatically associating 'open' texts with a more progressive ethics/politics.

There also appears to be little self-awareness on the part of such critics that what is perceived as a 'liberating' investment in the child is still an investment and as such its presence has implications that need to be made clear. Such discourse effectively bypasses or seals off discussion concerning what assumptions might lie behind that 'liberating' investment. As I stated above, to suggest that adults have an investment in the concept of the child is not to say anything new or radical. However, to suggest that adults have an *under-explained* investment in the concept of the child, and in the child literature and critical discourse that underpin that concept of the child, is to open up an important area for discussion.

My third question looks at what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform child literature theory and broader criticism, theory and philosophy. My purpose here will be to explore theorists' approaches to language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. Parts One and Two will look at whether critics have tended to open up or close down issues relating to these areas, while Part Three will problematise this notion of 'opening up'/'closing down' and move away from such terminology.

This leads into my two final questions: what have different critics said about child readers' experiences of the book and about the reality of 'the child'/children, and how are their claims to knowledge about these areas derived?

On the one hand, a number of critics have emphasised the difficulty of knowing anything about the reality of children. That reality is not generalisable: Rose highlights, for example, how "divisions of class, culture and literacy [gender, history, ethnicity, age role, class] ... undermine any generalised concept of the child" (p. 7). That reality is not determinate or stable, for where is the dividing line between adults and children? Again, Rose argues that "childhood is something in which [adults] continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind" (p. 12). And, the description of the reality of children

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29 See *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 153 and p. 163.

30 See *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, p. 6.

is also problematised by language in which that description is cast. On the other hand, however, a number of critics have emphasised the possibility of knowing something about the reality of children (their lives and experiences), through drawing on empirical research and work in such fields as sociology, psychology, education and linguistics. This is not to suggest that there can ever be any final answers about the reality of children for this is a contested reality. Rather, I want to focus on inconsistencies and contradictions in what critics say about the reality (realities) of 'the child'/children, and on how their claims to knowledge are derived. I maintain this is a significant area for child literature theory and that it should not be dismissed.

To look at what different critics have said about child readers' experiences of the book and how their claims to knowledge about these experiences are derived is to rehearse similar issues. Some critics have emphasised the difficulty of knowing anything about children's reading experiences because this area is problematised by language in which the descriptions of these experiences is cast, by adults' invention in the mediation and interpretation of empirical data, and by the resort to generalisations about the reading experience of some 'ideal child'. And, other critics have emphasised the possibility of knowing something about children's reading experiences through theories of reading, allied with skilled empirical studies of individual reader response.

This brings me to my concerns with Rose's work. Rose also emphasises the difficulties of saying something about the reality of children and of child readers' experiences of the text but, in doing so, she dismisses these areas and therefore fails to look at what critics/theorists have said about them. In this way, I feel that Rose misses the opportunity to look at what is said about the reality of children and of child readers' experiences of the text, and to explore critics' claims to knowledge. It is precisely this knowledge about children – these 'known somethings' about children – that we need to open up and question. In this way, Rose denies a substantial body of work on reader-response/reception theory and also standpoint/empiricist work on children's lives and experiences. This thesis therefore seeks to open up a critical space in which to work that has been all but shut down either by an uncritical acceptance of prevailing concepts of the reality of children and about child readers' experiences of the book or by an avoidance of engaging with these issues.

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To summarise, this thesis will work through the five questions mapped out above. Taking book- and child-centred critical commentaries on Garner's and Dahl's work as a case study,<sup>31</sup> Chapter 1 focuses on my first two questions. Rose's work will be important

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31 My discussion on critical discourse on Garner's work in both Chapters 1 and 3 will not be as

here in discussing the critical assumptions underpinning book-centred criticism of child literature. The primary focus of Chapter 2 is my third question: what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform the broader developments in child literature criticism and in criticism and theory in general that appear to have influenced child literature criticism over this period? In this context, I discuss the work of Leavis, I. A. Richards and the critical approaches grouped under the heading of the New Criticism, as there appear to be some important parallels between book- and child-centred criticism of child literature and these developments in broader literary criticism.

Part One will conclude that book- and child-centred critics have hidden behind the concepts of the 'critical adult' and the 'non-literary child reader' respectively, and that past critics (both in child literature criticism and in the broader literary criticism that has been influential over this period) have tended to close down issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. This is not to argue that these critics have closed down *all* issues concerning these areas or that contemporary theorists have opened up all of these issues but that these critics do not encourage dialogue or theorise/make explicit the concepts and terms that inform their position. Having made such an assessment, Part One points to the need for an alternative critical approach to child literature.

Chapter 3 similarly focuses on my first two questions, this time taking contemporary critical commentaries on Garner's and Dahl's work as a case study. The primary focus for Chapter 4 is again my third question. In this context, I will explore developments in reader-response theory, focusing on child literature critic Chambers, the work of Wolfgang Iser, and the phenomenological approaches of Roman Ingarden and Husserl. The chapter will then turn to developments in structuralism, in particular to the child literature critic Barbara Wall, developments in structuralist narratology and the work of Gerald Prince. Chapter 4 will conclude by working through developments in (post)structuralist theory, focusing on the work of child literature critic Hunt and the (post)structuralist theories of Jonathan Culler and Fish. I also turn to the work of Derrida and Martin Heidegger. However, as contemporary/poststructuralist theories are too complex and extensive to cover in one chapter, Part Three will continue this discussion.

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lengthy as my discussion on critical discourse on Dahl's work because, while there are many critical essays on Garner's work, many of these do not specifically engage with issues about child literature, child critical theory and child readers, although they are published within journals ostensibly concerned with these areas – an interesting point in itself, as I will discuss. Similarly, my discussion on child-centred criticism in Chapters 1 and 2 will also not be as lengthy as my discussion on book-centred criticism because it encompasses a much smaller body of writing (reflecting its position outside of 'mainstream' literary criticism) and is largely untheorised. Developments in contemporary critical theory, particularly reader-response theory, have brought to such criticism the clearly enunciated theoretical framework it lacked (as I will discuss in Part Two).

Part Two reaches the preliminary conclusion that contemporary critics of child literature have tended to hide behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader' and that contemporary theorists (both in child literature theory and in the broader criticism, theory and philosophy that have been influential over this period) have tended to open up a range of issues about language and meaning, politics and ethics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers that were closed down by past critics/theorists. However, some of these contemporary theorists have opened up these issues to a problematical 'endless' extent, while other theorists have closed down a number of significant issues opened up by past critics/theorists. Having made this preliminary assessment, Part Two points to the need to further explore contemporary/'poststructuralist' developments in child critical theory and broader theory and philosophy.

Accordingly, in Part Three, Chapter 5 explores in greater depth the issues that emerged in the previous chapter in the context of the theories of Rorty, Richard Bernstein, Christopher Norris, Habermas and Gadamer (I also want to draw more briefly on the work of Charles Taylor, Michel Foucault, Donald Davidson and Emmanuel Levinas) and the feminist theories of Butler, Donna Haraway and Flax. This is a key chapter for this thesis in terms of developing a more critical and comprehensive account of language and meaning, ethics and politics and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. Chapter 6 turns back to contemporary child critical theory to continue the discussion on Hunt (as well as Stephens) from a broader base and concludes by undertaking a critique of the work of Rose and Karín Lesnik-Oberstein. Chapter 6 also briefly reviews the empirical approaches to child literature explored by Hugh Crago, Chambers, Nicholas Tucker and Margaret Meek.

My critique points the way in Part Four towards a brief re-reading of Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* and Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Chapter 7 considers the complexity of the portrayal of children and adults in Garner's and Dahl's work.

Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*, comprising *The Stone Book* (1976), *Granny Reardun* (1977), *The Aimer Gate* (1978) and *Tom Fobble's Day* (1978), and Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) therefore act as key studies in Chapter 7 (although I will also touch on other of their works). Both books are directed at similar age groups<sup>32</sup> and represent important texts within each author's body of work. Many critics have singled out the *Stone Book Quartet* as Garner's most significant book. Townsend claims that

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32 Chris Powling identifies *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as being for readers aged 7-8 years, *Rosald Dahl*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1985), p. 69. Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*, published in the Collins Young Fiction series, has been identified by Townsend as "fiction which is mostly about, and could appeal to, children of seven or eight to eleven", *Written for Children* (1983), p. 341.



"Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*, appearing in the late 1970s, may well be its author's finest achievement"<sup>33</sup> and Moss observes that the "*Stone Book Quartet* seems likely to survive as a literary peak".<sup>34</sup> Hunt also recently stated that "the best children's book of the century may well be *The Stone Book Quartet*".<sup>35</sup> And, Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* still remains the most popular of his works: "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was voted No. 1 (above *Winnie the Pooh*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Alice*) in a *Sunday Times* survey to find the best ten children's books".<sup>36</sup> This study of Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* and Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is therefore significant and timely.

## A Final Note

'If you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out ... or, if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road, – or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along, – don't fly off'<sup>37</sup>

My purpose in this thesis in proceeding chronologically and dialectically through various developments in criticism, theory and philosophy is to gradually broaden my discussion on the concepts of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers, and to avoid constructing simplistic oppositions between the various critical positions. Part One therefore seeks, as a starting-point, to problematise critics' treatment of these concepts by raising issues that will be further explored (and themselves subject to question) in later chapters.

In this way, I have sought to develop my discussion on these key concepts as I progress through this thesis. I return to these concepts again and again, not repeating my discussion each time but taking it further in order, at the conclusion of this study, to build up to an extensive critique of child literature theory, and of broader criticism, theory and philosophy, based on a more *comprehensive* and *critical* understanding of these concepts.

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33 *Written for Children* (1987), p. 267.

34 *Part of the Pattern*, p. 145. See also Neil Philip, who refers to the *Stone Book Quartet* as "Garner's most important work to date", *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner* (London: Collins, 1981), p. 16 and Chambers, who refers to *The Stone Book* as "a touchstone by which to redefine the limits and possibilities of literature for the young" and as "one of the finest pieces of children's literature of the period", *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children* (London: Bodley Head, 1985), p. 31 and p. 110. In 1996, Garner's *The Stone Book* also received the inaugural Children's Literature Association (USA) annual award for child literature.

35 "Passing on the Past: The Problem of Books That Are For Children and That Were For Children", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1996-97), p. 201.

36 Dust jacket, Roald Dahl's *George's Marvellous Medicine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

37 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 41.

## **Part One**

### **Past Developments in Literary Criticism**

## Chapter 1

### Critical Approaches to Alan Garner and Roald Dahl (1969–1977): A 'Partial' Account of Book-Centred and Child-Centred Critical Discourse

#### *Hiding behind the 'Critical Adult' and the 'Non-Literary Child Reader'*

For the purpose of this study, the major critics on Roald Dahl's work writing over the period 1969–1977 can be broadly divided into two groups: book-centred and child-centred. The book-centred critics, such as Eleanor Cameron<sup>1</sup> and David Rees<sup>2</sup>, have found Dahl's work to reinforce questionable ethical, political and aesthetic values, and described it as sub-literary, dangerously subversive, and unsuitable (for children) in its subject matter.<sup>3</sup> Such critics advocate, at least in theory, that child books be judged by the same standards as adult books, standards centred on the 'literary merit' of the text. The child-centred critics, such as Anne Merrick<sup>4</sup>, have favourably assessed Dahl's work because of its appeal to child readers.

The major critics on Alan Garner's work writing over the same period can also be broadly divided into these groups. The book-centred critics, such as Cameron<sup>5</sup>, Townsend<sup>6</sup> and Rees<sup>7</sup>, have argued that Garner's later books represent his best work. His first two books, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, lack "subtlety" but

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- 1 See "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature", *Horn Book*, vol. 48, no. 5 (1972), pp. 433–440, "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part II", *Horn Book*, vol. 48, no. 6 (1972), pp. 572–579, "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part III", *Horn Book*, vol. 49, no. 7 (1973), pp. 79–85, "A Reply to Roald Dahl", *Horn Book*, vol. 49, no. 8 (1973), pp. 127–128, and "A Question of Taste", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 8, no. 21 (1976), pp. 59–63.
  - 2 See "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl", rpt. in *What Do Draculas Do?: Essays on Contemporary Writers of Fiction for Children and Young Adults* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1990), pp. 190–205. (I have included Rees' commentary within this group, although it falls outside the period 1969–1977, because it continues to reflect book-centred critical norms. Hunt has observed, for example, that Rees' work "perpetuates" an approach to criticism that "is dying out elsewhere", "Criticism and Pseudo-Criticism", *Signal*, 34 [1981], p. 14.)
  - 3 Another book-centred critic of Dahl's work to be discussed in this chapter is Paul Heins, "At Critical Cross-Purposes", *Horn Book*, vol. 49, no. 8 (1973), p. 111. See my bibliography for a detailed list of critical commentaries on Dahl's work.
  - 4 See "*The Nightwatchmen* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as Books to be Read to Children", *Children's Literature in Education*, no. 16 (1975), pp. 21–30.
  - 5 See "*The Owl Service*: A Study", pp. 425–433.
  - 6 See "Alan Garner", pp. 81–96.
  - 7 See "Hanging in Their True Shapes: Alan Garner", *The Marble in the Water: Essays on Contemporary Writers of Fiction for Children and Young Adults* (Boston: The Horn Book, 1980), pp. 56–67. (Rees' essay is included here for the reasons discussed above – see my footnote 2.) Another book-centred critic of Garner's work is Heins, "Off the Beaten Path", *Horn Book*, vol. 49, no. 6 (1973), pp. 580–581. See my bibliography for a detailed list of critical commentaries on Garner's work.

Garner's fourth book, *The Owl Service*, "shows a new maturity and authority".<sup>8</sup> The child-centred critics, such as Aidan Chambers<sup>9</sup>, have argued that with his later work, particularly *Red Shift*, Garner has "given up any pretence of writing for children".<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the assumptions that underpin these different critical approaches to Dahl's and Garner's work and, in particular, to focus on the first two questions outlined in the Introduction.

### Issues in book-centred criticism: Dahl

*Establishing 'literary merit': excluding certain critical approaches (child-centred approaches) and certain texts (popular texts)*

Implicit in Cameron's commentary is an assumption that child literature should be assessed by the same critical standards as adult literature: "let us test *Charlotte's Web* by referring its various elements to standards set by some of the finest critics and writers of adult literature".<sup>11</sup> The standards that determine what writing is best have, in Cameron's view, already been established in adult literature. To recall Matthew Arnold, it is then a matter of applying these standards as a "touchstone" to child fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The critical standards privileged by Cameron clearly centre on determining the 'literary merit' of the text:

those who are involved with children's books and reading, those charged with making judgements, must bring all of their reflective powers to bear as well as a sense of aesthetics, because popularity and the literary value of a book are so often confused. Popularity in itself does not prove anything about a book's essential worth.<sup>13</sup>

My argument here is not so much with this approach as it is with the way in which the term 'literary' has been defined. In order to uphold a standard of 'literary merit', Cameron and other book-centred critics seek to exclude certain critical approaches, such

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8 Townsend, "Alan Garner", p. 83 and p. 86. See also Rees, "too many pretentious claims have been made for Garner's first two novels" but *Elidor* "shows Garner emerging as a rather more interesting writer", "Hanging in Their True Shapes: Alan Garner", p. 57 and p. 58.

9 See "Letter from England: Literary Crossword Puzzle ... or Masterpiece?" *Horn Book*, vol. 49, no. 5 (1973), pp. 494-497.

10 "Letter from England: Literary Crossword Puzzle ... or Masterpiece?" p. 497.

11 "McLuhan, Youth and Literature: Part II", p. 572.

12 "[T]here can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry", "The Study of Poetry" in *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century*, eds. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 267.

13 "A Reply to Roald Dahl", pp. 128. Responding to Cameron's comment, Alasdair Campbell makes the important point that while popularity "indeed gives no proof of merit" neither does it automatically imply "an absence of quality", "Children's Writers: Roald Dahl", *The School Librarian*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1981), p. 113.

as those that bring issues of child readership into focus, and certain texts. Child-centred criticism is regarded not only as irrelevant to 'literary criticism' but also as inherently flawed. In emphasising child readers' experiences of the text (rather than the experience of some generalised/idealised 'child reader'), the child-centred approach threatened to undermine what were clearly regarded by book-centred critics as *established* 'literary' standards of excellence. Accordingly, Cameron is highly critical of Merrick's essay, which bases its favourable assessment of the popular *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and apparent dismissal of Helen Cresswell's more literary *The Nightwatchmen* on child readers' responses to these books. "*The Nightwatchmen*", Merrick states, "I have found impossible to read successfully to a group of children. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* I have never known to fail".<sup>14</sup> Merrick takes the view that child readers' responses to a text should at least be a consideration in the critical appraisal of that text.<sup>15</sup>

The rejection of a child-centred critical approach and the rejection of popular texts are therefore closely connected – the concept of popularity immediately raising issues concerning child readership that book-centred critics are seeking to put to one side. "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is popular", Rees states, "but this is not a matter that should concern the critic any more than whether Shakespeare's popularity has any bearing on his merits as a creative artist; it is a question for those who select books, librarians and so on".<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Heins has suggested that to discuss the popularity and 'literary merit' of Dahl's fiction is to be immediately at "critical cross-purposes":

[a] criticism of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* on literary grounds ... is often met with a statement regarding the popularity of the book ... Interested adult readers of children's books would do well to avoid confusing the nonliterary with the literary merits of books.

As Heins sees it, this is to confuse 'literary criticism' – that is, "[h]ow should *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* be regarded as a work of literature?" – with something outside serious critical investigation: "[a]re children to be the ... arbiters of children's books?"<sup>17</sup> Book-centred critics therefore direct considerable critical disapproval towards those books that are popular with children alone.<sup>18</sup> The "children's story which is enjoyed only by children", C. S. Lewis once claimed, "is a bad children's story", and this would still

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14 "The *Nightwatchmen* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as Books to be Read to Children", p. 21. Further references will be in the text.

15 I should emphasise that Merrick constantly undercuts this child-centred position, as I have outlined it here. I will return to her essay when I discuss child-centred criticism.

16 "Caviare to the General: Jane Gardam", *What Do Draculas Do?*, p. 160.

17 "At Critical Cross-Purposes", p. 111.

18 It is of interest in this context, as Keith Barker points out, that a book's "popularity with children is nowhere stated in the guidelines to the Carnegie Medal" (the major UK child literature award), *In the Realms of Gold: The Story of the Carnegie Medal* (London: Julia MacRae Books, 1986), p. 16.

seem to hold true for these critics.<sup>19</sup> Dahl, however, "plays too much to the gallery where the children sit".<sup>20</sup>

*Establishing 'literary merit': 'critical adults' (should) value the same texts*

Cameron's concern is not only that Merrick appears to accept child readers' responses to the text as a valid contribution to critical practice but that she privileges these responses over and above her own response, as a *critical adult*, to the book:

[w]hat absolutely baffles me is why a woman with Anne Merrick's experience and education should so blindly narrow her choice for discussion to this either-or of two such opposite appeals as *Charlie* and *The Nightwatchmen* when surely she is aware of any number of others she might choose from, books by Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner ... But what most profoundly baffles me is why a perceptive adult with acute critical powers should deliberately push aside the results of her study of *Charlie* in her willingness, her *eagerness* ... to indulgently read what she sees herself as appealing 'to the worst in children'.<sup>21</sup>

In Cameron's view, there is one response only to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and she assumes that all "critical adults"<sup>22</sup> will (must?) finally achieve conformity in their reading of such texts. Child-centred criticism threatens what are perceived to be established 'literary' standards and underpinning this notion is the belief that all readers or at least a particular group of readers/critics – 'critical adults' – will (should) value a text in the same way (and by doing so therefore come to value the same texts). In this way, book-centred critics clearly hold onto narrow concepts of 'literature' and 'literary merit', concepts they also regard as relatively straightforward.

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19 Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Virginia Haviland (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973), p. 233. Similarly, Heins suggests that the "prime function" of the child literature critic is to "signalize those books which appealing at present to children will seem even better when they are reread by those same children in their adulthood", "Out on a Limb with the Critics", rpt. in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Haviland, p. 407. (There are many examples of similar statements.) As Zohar Shavit observes, in order for a child book to be accepted by adults, it appears that "it is not enough for it to be accepted by children". The criteria for a "positive evaluation" of a child book "is its success in appealing to adults", *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 37-38. Barbara Wall pushes this line even further, commenting that there is an "unconscious requirement that in 'good' writing for children, it should not appear that children are addressed at all", *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 15.

20 Rees, "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl", p. 204.

21 "A Question of Taste", p. 62.

22 Cameron uses this term in an essay on Garner's work: "I am speaking of artistry from the point of view of the critical adult", *The Owl Service: A Study*, p. 425. This notion is a key one for book-centred critics. My questioning of this term, as I will further discuss, is not to doubt that a given group of adults is critically trained but rather to call attention to Cameron's non-engagement with this term – that she does not theorise/make explicit the assumptions that inform such a term.

Cameron's position here is also largely untheorised. She does not theorise these concepts of 'literature' and 'literary merit' or encourage critical dialogue concerning her claims. Instead, she maintains a position that is founded upon truth claims that she presents as unproblematic (at least to 'critical adults'), truth claims that therefore require no explanation or theoretical justification.

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Before I engage further with Cameron's discourse – her privileging of 'literary merit' based upon standards/values that are perceived to be unproblematic – it is important to clarify *on what terms* I am engaging with the issues she raises.

As I will discuss, in engaging with issues of standards and values (issues that inevitably raise broader concerns about the nature of meaning and truth, the foundations of knowledge, the concepts of rightness and the good and so on), critics have frequently assumed positions that are simplistically oppositional and, ultimately, confused and confusing. This has been *either* in the quest to establish a universal (stable and secure) foundation upon which to ground knowledge (and so to avoid radical scepticism, and intellectual and moral chaos) *or* in the conviction that such grounding is an illusion with radical epistemological scepticism being our only course. This is to rehearse the argument of critics such as Bernstein of our being in the grip of "a grand Either/Or": "*either* there is a rational grounding of the norms of critique *or* the conviction that there is such a rational grounding is itself a self-deceptive illusion".<sup>24</sup> This "foundation" metaphor, Bernstein observes, "still haunts us and hovers in the background of the controversies waged by objectivists and relativists".<sup>25</sup> (I will come back to the terms objectivism and relativism shortly.)

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23 Because of the nature of this thesis – in proceeding chronologically and dialectically through various developments in criticism, theory and philosophy to gradually broaden my discussion on the highly complex concepts of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/the reader' and readers – I need to occasionally pause from the main flow of my argument to problematise, further explore and/or clarify various issues as they arise. In Part One, these 'interludes' will mainly seek, as a starting-point, to problematise critics' treatment of the concepts I have highlighted by raising issues that will be further explored in later chapters. I will use this notation throughout this thesis to mark these as 'interludes' (rather than as section breaks) from the main flow of my argument.

24 *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge Polity Press, 1991), p. 8. Bernstein labels this anxiety "the 'Cartesian Anxiety'", drawing on Descartes' *Meditations* as the "*locus classicus* in modern philosophy for the metaphor of the 'foundation' and for the conviction that the philosopher's quest is to search for an Archimedean point upon which we can ground our knowledge", *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 16.

25 *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 18.

An example of this tendency to 'either-or-ism', to return to the issue of (literary) standards and values, is how the questioning by one critic of another critic's assumptions about 'literary' standards frequently turns into a questioning of whether there is such a thing as 'literature' and, if so, whether it is defined *either* by the presence of certain (objective) characteristics in the text *or* by the (relative) value readers/critics place upon those characteristics. Terry Eagleton, for instance, has argued that we should not think of literature as some kind of "inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing" but rather "as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing".<sup>26</sup> In this way, he concludes, "[a]nything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature ... can cease to be literature" (p. 10). However, in reacting against an extreme objectivist position that 'literature' corresponds to a historically stable body of good writing distinguished by inherent aesthetic qualities, Eagleton arguably places himself in an extreme relativist position. Such a position is open to questioning on self-refuting grounds for does it follow from the notion that, if 'literature' is not a stable and objective category, *anything* can be literature? How can Eagleton *prove* that 'anything can be literature', if this notion (by his own argument) is not true or false but simply a matter of critical taste, except by himself appealing to the specific universal: that 'anything can be literature'.<sup>27</sup>

Wayne Booth has in turn challenged the claim that "the value of works is not in any real sense *in* them",<sup>28</sup> arguing that while texts "appear to be inert until a human being takes them in ... they differ immensely in their potential energy". By way of demonstration, Booth compares a work of "great power" (*King Lear*) with some "feeble works" (a few lines of improvised couplets) to demonstrate "just how much is, after all, in the work itself" (p. 89). *King Lear* engenders many more readings than the couplets and, as Booth confirms, "the more readings a text makes possible", the "better" it is (p. 84, footnote 3). While Booth's pragmatism is refreshing here, arguably his approach ultimately reintroduces the very issue he seeks to resolve – is the value of these two texts (their

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26 *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 9. Further references will be in the text.

27 Fish takes a somewhat similar position to Eagleton on this question of 'what is literature'. While he resists being drawn into an oppositional objectivist/subjectivist stance, he again arguably falls into an oppositional objectivist/relativist stance: "the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it", *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 11. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, such a position raises questions concerning on what grounds Fish's theory of (interpretive) communities could be said to be valid – how he is able to talk about/identify different communities from a seemingly objective metacritical stance when his relativist stance would seem to disallow such a stance. However, to be fair to Fish, his position is somewhat more sophisticated and nuanced than my reductive 'knock-down' critique of his position (as self-referentially inconsistent) might suggest.

28 *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 84 and p. 86. Further references will be in the text.



"power" or "feebleness") *either* defined by the presence of certain textual features (the length of the text, for example) *or* by the value the critic (Booth) has placed upon those features?<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, to return to critical discourse on child literature, Cameron arguably takes up a position that *either* there is a historically stable body of good writing distinguished by inherent aesthetic qualities (based upon an established and unproblematic standard of 'literary merit') *or* we are faced by the intellectual and moral chaos offered by popular literature and child-centred critique.

Engaging with these sorts of issues, as the approaches of Booth, Fish (see footnote 27) but, more strongly, Eagleton and Cameron demonstrate, too often degenerates into a matter of labelling an opponent's position as objectivist, subjectivist or relativist<sup>30</sup> (or, in terms of child literature criticism, book-centred or child-centred) and taking up a position at the other extreme. Two important issues require clarification here. While some critics do undoubtedly take up 'either-or-ist' positions, other critics (who like Booth and Fish seek to map out a more comprehensive and critical approach) may be unfairly pushed into 'either-or-ist' positions as a way of providing easy 'knock-down' critiques of their positions. To engage in such a practice is to miss a central point of this thesis – that it is the discursive space lying in between these oppositional extremes that is of more interest. This is again to build on Bernstein's point that we need to "*exorcize* the Cartesian Anxiety and liberate ourselves from its seductive appeal" (p. 19). The definition of one position in opposition to the other relies upon the acceptance of norms that in themselves need to be questioned and exposed. There are instead many variations on these stances with which

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29 Importantly, Booth later acknowledges this point, accepting the inherent ambiguity of this exercise: "the question of whether value is in the poem or in the reader is radically and permanently ambiguous, requiring two answers. Of course the value is not there, *actually*, until it is actualized, by the reader. But of course it could not be actualized if it were not there, *in potential*, in the poem" (p. 89).

30 As a broad definition, subjectivism is the belief that conceptual/interpretive frameworks are merely a matter of personal taste and therefore idiosyncratic. However, the belief that we can interpret *without* any prejudices/theoretical assumptions (that we are not already enmeshed in cultural constraints and categories) is a delusion. Objectivism, drawing on Bernstein for my definition, is "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness". The objectivist maintains that "unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or language in a rigorous manner we cannot avoid radical skepticism", *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 8. Relativism is, to again quote Bernstein, "the basic conviction" that when we turn to examine fundamental concepts such as "rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms", we are forced to acknowledge that "in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme". Hence, "there is no substantive overarching framework ... by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms" (p. 8). The problem with relativism is that it is "self-referentially inconsistent and paradoxical. For implicitly or explicitly, the relativist claims that his or her position is true, yet the relativist also insists that since truth is relative, what is taken as true may also be false. Consequently, relativism itself may be true *and* false" (p. 9). I will have more to say about the definitions of these terms in Chapter 4.

critics might engage without pushing themselves (and often other critics) into extreme positions, for why should these be the *only* available positions?

As I have suggested, Booth's approach provides an interesting example of an attempt to avoid such 'either-or-ism' (I will discuss other approaches in later chapters). He bases his critical approach upon the notion of "co-duction" – "[c]o-duction will be what we do whenever we say ... 'Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced, *comparing with other more or less qualified observers*, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker) ones" (p. 72), by which demonstration a reader is, or is not, led to agree. While there is nothing absolute in Booth's approach<sup>31</sup> and I am therefore cautious of unfairly exaggerating his stance or seeming to push him into looking for some ultimate foundation for his evaluation, his terms still raise a number of questions. Where, for example, is the dividing line between his 'qualified' and 'unqualified' observer/critic, and what is a 'qualified' observer? These questions are particularly important in the context of child literature criticism if one is to entertain the notion, for example, of children as critics and of so-called child-centred critics as 'qualified' observers. And, is the appeal to the consensus of a group of qualified readers simply to shift from the concept of one 'ideal reader' to a group of 'ideal readers'? While Booth talks of his "pragmatic choice of a critical pluralism" as a "pluralism with limits" (p. 489) and his pragmatic approach is therefore a corrective to anyone acclaiming irreducible plurality, his position continues to provoke questions. However, this is an important difference between approaches such as Booth's and approaches such as Eagleton's and Cameron's, for Booth does not necessarily seek to shut down critical engagement with his position although, as critics such as Bernstein have suggested, there is always a danger of this if pluralism is limited/fragmented too far.<sup>32</sup>

This discussion touches upon issues that will be of central importance throughout this thesis and has led into areas that I want to further develop in later chapters. However, these preliminary comments stand as a gesture towards the position I will be developing. To more clearly focus my comments in terms of this chapter, this brief discussion has sought to question/problematised the too easy definition and adoption of one critical position in opposition to another and acceptance at face value of terms such as objectivism and subjectivism, and book-centred and child-centred. All too frequently, the object/subject, text/reader and book/child dichotomies serve to obscure more complex issues and the more interesting positions that lie in between these extremes.

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31 Unlike Cameron's notion of the 'critical adult' which is offered as an unproblematic concept and tends to shut down critical dialogue, Booth seeks to encourage critical dialogue and accepts that his concepts are problematic – that other critics may not agree.

32 Bernstein has commented that we are in danger of "*fragmenting* pluralism where the centrifugal forces become so strong that we are only able to communicate with a small group that already shares our own biases, and no longer even experience the need to talk with others outside of this circle", *The New Constellation*, p. 335.

*Establishing 'literary merit': preserving certain aesthetic, ethical and political values*

To Cameron, 'literature' provides a way of preserving certain aesthetic traditions perceived to be under threat in society:

I should like to say to all parents: Your small child *must* be read and sung the Mother Goose rhymes at the earliest age, *must* be read the Beatrix Potter stories and the finest of the picture books ... For textbooks alone, unless they include selections of what is enduring in children's literature, can never give, aesthetically or spiritually, the sense of what is precious in literature. We must not *let* stories written with truth and wisdom die out.<sup>33</sup>

'Literature' also provides a way of preserving certain ethical and political values or truths: "[i]t would seem to devolve upon teachers to offset vulgarity and the fourth-rate by reading aloud those books which reveal the truths of the human condition on the broad level of universal human experience".<sup>34</sup> Dahl's child books have been criticised for their "phoniness", "hypocrisy"<sup>35</sup>, "sadism" (p. 61) and "callousness" (p. 62). They have been found to be "racist"<sup>36</sup>, full of "violence" (p. 191), "spiteful" (p. 192), "reprehensible for [their] socio-political attitudes", of "dubious morality" (p. 193), "sexist" and "gratuitously frightening" (p. 195). It is clear from such comments that the content of child texts must meet certain specifications before they can be received by child readers and that Dahl's child books fail to meet these specifications. Not only must child fiction be 'good' (of 'literary' value), it must also be 'good for' (of ethical/political value).

The fact that child fiction is valued as being 'good for' is not in itself restrictive. This is not to argue that ethical/political critique<sup>37</sup> of child literature is not a legitimate form of

33 "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature", p. 435.

34 "A Question of Taste", p. 63.

35 Cameron, "A Question of Taste", p. 60. Further references will be in the text.

36 Rees, "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl", p. 190. Further references will be in the text.

37 It is important to clarify at this point my use of the term ethical/political critique. Some critics have defined ethical critique in a broad sense to encompass both political issues and 'moral' issues (I have placed scare quotes around the term 'moral' because, while it serves my purpose of differentiation here, this is not a very satisfactory term). This is Booth's approach in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* – his use of the term ethics encompasses both the moral and the political. However, other critics, in viewing (like Booth) the moral and the political as inextricably intertwined, have preferred to use the term 'ethical-political'. This is Bernstein's approach – he employs this term to emphasise the important point that "we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics", *The New Constellation*, p. 9. (This is not, however, to overlook David Parker's point that while political approaches to literature could be regarded as a form of ethical criticism on the grounds that they are indeed "implicitly ethical", it is important to acknowledge the fact that "political criticism has frequently been either hostile or indifferent to ethics", *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

criticism<sup>38</sup> or to suggest that texts should (or could) avoid didactic concerns.<sup>39</sup> Rather, what is of interest here is how different critics think that literature should go about being 'good for' – what is claimed to constitute ethical/political value and what assumptions underpin these claims.

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Clearly, Dahl's child fiction does merit questioning on ethical and political grounds. Rees' major complaint about Dahl's books is that they are morally confused: "Dahl has written other stories for children that are more tasteless than *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and some less so – the moral universe he inhabits seems confused and full of contradictions" (p. 190). The questionable social stereotypes and prejudices reinforced in Dahl's child fiction have been an issue of particular critical concern here. The first edition of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has come under frequent attack for racial stereotyping in its depiction of the African Oompa-Loompas transported by Mr Wonka to work in his factory.<sup>40</sup> As Louis Bouchard points out, while "the Black characters are treated in an approving manner, whereas several of the white characters are treated harshly, the racism consists of the time-dishonoured stereotypes, childishness and

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1994], footnote 6, pp. 200-201. Conversely, however, traditional ethical critique has often been indifferent to political approaches, such as those that identify class and gender inequalities.) I have preferred, like Bernstein, to use the terminology ethical and political (and ethical/political) throughout this thesis, agreeing that the ethical and the political are intertwined. When, for the purposes of the discussion at hand, I have occasionally and temporarily needed to treat separately the ethical (in its 'moral' sense alone) and the political, I will use the term ethical by itself (although, as I have suggested, I regard such a separation as somewhat artificial).

38 A number of critics have recently challenged what they perceive to be as reductive views of ethical/political concepts as well as attempts by other critics to exclude ethical/political critique altogether, developing their position in more detail than Booth. See amongst others, Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Parker, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*; Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*; Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

39 See Booth, "All Narratives are 'Didactic'", *The Company We Keep*, pp. 151-153. Chambers points out how the term 'didactic' has been debased by a number of critics of child fiction – didacticism is erroneously viewed as "an old-fashioned literary weakness" to be eradicated from child books, "Three Fallacies about Children's Books", rpt. in *Signposts to Criticism*, ed. Bator, p. 56.

40 The offending dialogue proceeds as follows: "[y]ou know what I think ...", cried Charlie, 'I think Mr Wonka has made them himself – out of chocolate!' ... 'Chocolate!' cried Mr Wonka. 'Nonsense!' ... 'Pygmies they are! ... I discovered them myself. I brought them over from Africa myself – the whole tribe of them ... I found them in the very deepest and darkest part of the African jungle where no white man had ever been before ... So I shipped them all over here, every man, woman, and child in the Oompa-Loompa tribe. It was easy. I smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them, and they all got here safely. They are wonderful workers"', *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 4th ed. (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 60-62. This dialogue remained in place until the 1973 edition when every reference to African Oompa-Loompas was removed. Instead the Oompa-Loompas come from an imaginary "Loompaland", their skin is "rosy-white", and their long hair "golden-brown", *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1978), p. 66 and p. 73. The illustrations were also amended.

dependency upon whites, with which the Black characters are presented".<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Dahl's *The Twits* equates an 'ugly' physical appearance with an evil nature, "[i]f a person has ugly thoughts ... the face gets uglier and uglier"<sup>42</sup> and, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Augustus Gloop's obesity is associated with selfishness. *The Witches* has also been much criticised for its sexist stereotyping of women.<sup>43</sup>

A problem here is that, in focusing on these ethical/political concerns, childhood has often been viewed by critics as the *ideal* place to start modifying questionable ethical/political values and inculcating 'correct' attitudes in their place, and child fiction as an *ideal* vehicle to effect this change. For Cameron, for example, the "fresh and new and malleable"<sup>44</sup> child represents the ideal audience with which to begin the inculcation and preservation of these attitudes. As Booth has suggested, most critics who have openly addressed ethical and political questions have warned mainly "about the dangers lurking, *for other people*, in seductive fictions" (p. 159), and clearly Cameron and Rees fall into this category. Rees assumes that only child readers will be affected by the dubious ethics and politics of Dahl's books – "[t]he adult reader, of course, won't take such statements seriously" (p. 195).

In discussing child books, Rees cannot avoid perhaps being in the critically precarious position, as Booth has pointed out, of warning of the moral dangers for *others*<sup>45</sup> and of dealing with the difficult question of ethical/political consequence (the carry-over from narrative experience to behaviour). Booth emphasises that ethical and political criticism involves both "judging stories and their effects on readers" (its usual form) and an "ethics of readers – their responsibilities *to* stories" (p. 9) – with the latter being his preferred approach.<sup>46</sup> In pursuing this approach, however, Booth is only able to postpone but not finally avoid discussion about the effect of stories on readers: "I have put off as long as

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41 "A New Look at Old Favourites: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, eds. Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1972), p. 112. See also Townsend, "there is an astonishing insensitivity about the creation, as late as the 1960s, of the comic little dark-skinned Oompa-Loompas who man the factory", *Written for Children* (1983), p. 255.

42 Dahl, *The Twits* (London: Puffin Books, 1982), p. 15.

43 Rees, for example, suggests that it has the potential to "thoroughly confuse [children] about adult behaviour – the behaviour of women in particular" (p. 195).

44 "A Question of Taste", p. 61.

45 "The troublesome fact remains", Booth states, "that when we argue about the consequences – especially consequences for other people – we are always on shakier ground than most of us will want to stand on" (p. 164).

46 Fred Inglis anticipates this differentiation Booth seeks to make between these two areas of ethical/political critique: "[i]rrespective of what the child makes of an experience, the adult wants to judge it for himself, and so doing means judging it for *itself*. This judgement comes first, and it is at least logically separable from doing the reckoning for children", *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7. In outlining his own ethical/political approach, however, Inglis is not as careful with his terms as is Booth. See Charles Sarland's critique of Inglis's study, "False Premises", *Signal*, 37 (1982), pp. 11-20.

possible this moment when I must talk directly about ethical consequence" (p. 227). Such a discussion, he acknowledges, "introduces problems of proof that can never be decisively settled" (p. 159). Booth's way of addressing this problem is as follows: he maintains that because we possess "commonsense knowledge that some art works are good for us and our children and that some are bad" (p. 163), we can therefore engage in valid discussion about the moral dangers for *others* (as well as for ourselves) inherent in particular texts. And, in doing so, "we face not an infinity of doctrinal disputes, only a multiplicity" (p. 421). Again, Booth's pragmatism is refreshing here, although his position raises similar questions about his use of terms such as "commonsense" and how the "multiplicity" of viewpoints he legitimates is to be limited: is it only the viewpoints of "qualified observers" (Booth, p. 72) and "experienced readers" (Booth, p. 85) that are to count? I do not want to specifically discuss Booth's use of these terms here so much as to draw attention to Cameron's *different* use of a similar term: the "critical adult".

Booth appeals to a limited pluralism and advocates moving away from "flat judgement for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep – and the company that we ourselves provide" (p. x). Cameron, however, rejects such pluralism (limited or otherwise). She favours E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*,<sup>47</sup> for example, for its ability to communicate what she regards as self-evident/unproblematic ethical and political truths (truths that are stable and secure):

[i]t is the burden of feeling and meaning in *Charlotte's Web* which makes it memorable, which will speak to all times and not just to our own time. It is that burden which gives all the great children's books their greatness, a burden which is a natural result of their author's ability to invest a tale for children with wisdom and truth.<sup>48</sup>

Cameron implies that there is a timeless way of reading and that all readers – or, at least, by her own admission, all 'critical adult readers' – from all times, will (should) grasp the same truth and receive the same meaning from the text. As illustrated by Cameron's criticism of Merrick, the implication is not that a plurality/range of (legitimate) views exist among 'critical adults' (as among Booth's 'qualified observers' and 'experienced readers') but rather that 'critical adults' (should) hold the *one* view.

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Before I engage further with Cameron's privileging of certain ethical and political values or truths that are perceived to be self-evident (underpinned by a perception of language and meaning as stable and unproblematic), it is again important to clarify on what terms I am engaging with the issues she raises.

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<sup>47</sup> Cameron states that this is one of the "best" books written for children, "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature", p. 438.

<sup>48</sup> "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part II, p. 576-577.

In undertaking ethical/political critique, there is frequently a recourse to the same kind of 'either-or-ism' in relation to objectivist, subjectivist and relativist positions that I discussed earlier – that *either* there are certain ethical/political values that remain true (that are universal, self-evident and unproblematic) *or* ethical/political values are merely a matter of personal opinion. The "anxiety" here, as Bernstein again sums it up, is that "unless we can discover fixed, indubitable foundations, we are confronted with intellectual and moral chaos, radical skepticism, and self-defeating relativism".<sup>49</sup>

However, given the complexities of the issues surrounding language and meaning and truth and value, I want to again be careful in my critique not to push critics into extreme objectivist or relativist positions on these issues, as some kind of easily dismissed 'straw target', and then myself take up a position at the opposite extreme. The ethical/political criticism practiced by some critics may well appear extreme, to signal encouragement, for example, for a fiction that is full of repressive moral judgements. And yet, as Booth points out, there is always a danger, even when such criticism is practised well, that one critic's "tentatively embraced norms" will strike another critic as "dangerous ideology" – that "*my ... standards may seem to you mere dogma*" (p. 137).<sup>50</sup> However, Cameron does seem to be drawn into an 'either-or-ist' position here, that unless we can establish permanent and fixed foundations for what constitutes ethical/political value, we are faced with moral chaos: "childhood itself is being degraded, attacked from all sides in such a way that soon there may be *no such thing* as childhood".<sup>51</sup> Either we preserve childhood as a place of innocence where, as Rose points out, it "serves as a term of universal social reference which conceals all the historical divisions [class, gender, race] and difficulties [language, sexuality] of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10) or we lose childhood altogether.

'Literature', as Cameron has suggested, equates *only* to "those books which reveal the truths of the human condition on the broad level of universal human experience".<sup>52</sup> To borrow Booth's words here, she has experienced something "that feels unquestionably valuable" but has "leapt to proclaim it the only true gift" (p. 51), without considering

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49 See *The New Constellation*, p. 17.

50 This, Booth stresses, cannot be used as an argument against ethical/political criticism per se but instead forms the substance of the debate *within* such criticism: "I can only hope that when readers disagree with my judgments, they will find that in their very way of disagreeing they exemplify the validity and importance of ethical criticism and of hard thought about how to do it well. The proof that we are doing it well does not rest on our arriving at judgments demonstrable to and accepted by all observers" (p. xi).

51 "A Question of Taste", p. 63 (emphasis added). It is interesting that Cameron perceives one of the biggest threats to (her construction of) childhood to be the child's exposure to sexuality through child books: "soon there may be no such thing as childhood ... Even small children, it is now felt ... must study in close-up, photographic detail masturbation, oral stimulus, and the sexual act taking place between human beings as revealed in a book entitled *Show Me*, to me as tasteless, as potentially dangerous a book, as was ever published for children" (p. 63).

52 "A Question of Taste", p. 63.

what other critics/readers might make of it. As Booth observes, this good is not only *a* good but is regarded as *the* good that all art should serve. Instead of seeking "broadly applicable standards that might help explain our enthusiasms and loathings", such critics "pursue the inherently reductive quest for qualities that will prove benign or malign for all readers in all circumstances" (p. 56).

Rees also tends to engage in ethical/political appraisals of Dahl's work without acknowledging that other critics/readers of Dahl's texts might experience them differently. The moral of *George's Marvellous Medicine*, for example, as Rees interprets it, is "telling the young reader" that grumpy adults "deserve to be poisoned and killed" (p. 197). Mark West, however, suggests that Rees' interpretation is "based on a literal reading of the book and, according to a recent [doctoral] study, is one that most children do not share" – few children took it seriously or saw the events as having any transfer to real life.<sup>53</sup> Empirical research on actual child readers' responses to Dahl's books is used to open up for question Rees' claims about the presumed response to the book of some generalised/idealised 'child reader'. Similarly, of the slapstick humour in *The Twits* (humour that Merrick, based on her experience in the classroom, suggests might appeal to child readers [p. 29]), Rees states, "[t]he net result of all this disgusting behaviour is a disgusting book" (p. 195), without any recognition that other readers/critics might have responded differently to the book. In his commentary on Dahl (written in 1988), Rees quotes liberally from Cameron's work but makes no mention of Merrick's work or of two other significant critical commentaries on Dahl's work that pre-date and are in conflict with his own.<sup>54</sup>

Cameron's and Rees' stance on language and meaning, and truth and value, raises questions because they regard these issues as straightforward. They imply that there are certain values (aesthetic, ethical and political) that are self-evident without engaging with the implications of this argument and so adopt a narrow conception of language and meaning, and a narrow form of ethical/political critique.

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Cameron's position is overtly ethical. As I will discuss in the following chapter, unlike many other critics under discussion in this study, she *openly* seeks to promote a type of child fiction that will inculcate in child readers the ethical, political and aesthetic values

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53 "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3, (1990), p. 116.

54 Sarland, "The Secret Seven vs The Twits: Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?" *Signal*, 42 (1983), pp. 155-171 and West, "Regression and Fragmentation of the Self in *James and the Giant Peach*", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1985), pp. 219-225. I will discuss these commentaries in part two of this study.



she holds important. Cameron's position is also political, although less consciously so. As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, child literature is frequently discussed in terms that carry a specific political program for writing and its function:

[i]f we ourselves take little thought as to the question of taste, if we refuse to observe with critical eyes what can influence our children ... then we can be quite certain that the next generation will be just that much more handicapped in bringing up their own children. The consequences for the future in the lessening of concern for our language, the blurring and destruction of insights both ethical and aesthetic, are already being felt in every segment of our society. And we know it.<sup>55</sup>

### *Preference for 'classic realist' texts*

Both Rees and Cameron reveal a preference for so-called 'classic realist' child literature (I will discuss some problems with this term shortly). Where Rees is critical of Dahl's books it is because they are "two-dimensional and unreal" (p. 191), "phony" and "fake" (p. 194), "sham" (p. 197), and have "loose ends" (p. 198).<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, where Rees is positive about Dahl's books, it is because they are "believable" and "convincing" (p. 199) – Dahl's "realistic pieces" contain "good writing and sound authentic" (p. 198) and the "realistic tales ... work well" (p. 199). Similarly, Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is disliked by Cameron because it is "wish-fulfilment in caricature, and as caricature, it is removed from reality"<sup>57</sup> and lacks "believable characters".<sup>58</sup>

#### *(a) Rose on 'classic realism'*

Rose is deeply suspicious of critical discourse that privileges 'classic realist' texts. In discussions on child fiction, Rose observes she repeatedly comes across the demand "that there should be no disturbance at the level of language" (p. 20) – no ambiguity, no indication that language is something other than fixed and stable (with a single meaning rather than multiple meanings), and no playing with language in the "sense of undercutting its transparency and ease" (p. 40). These characteristics define for Rose a 'classic realist' perspective on language and meaning.

Rose charts a progression in child fiction towards a "gradual dropping of the conspicuous narrating voice – that voice which in the very earliest books revealed itself as so explicitly didactic and repressive" (p. 59). Early child fiction reveals a division between two different types of language and modes of address: both an adult author reassuring adult

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55 "A Question of Taste", p. 63 (emphasis added).

56 Other critics clearly hold similar views, commenting that "the violent exaggeration of language and almost grotesque characterizations of the children's aunts [in Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*] impair the storytelling and destroy the illusion of reality and plausibility which any good book must achieve", Ethel L. Heins, "Review of *James and the Giant Peach*", *School Library Journal*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1961), p. 50.

57 "A Reply to Roald Dahl", p. 127.

58 "A Question of Taste", p. 62.

buyers of the book's improving purpose and an adult author speaking to child readers. This division, she observes, has "progressively been removed, as the adult intention has more and more been absorbed into the story and, apparently, rendered invisible" (p. 60). "One effect of this", Rose continues,

is that children's fiction has tended to inherit a very specific aesthetic theory, in which showing is better than telling: the ideal work lets the characters and events speak for themselves. This is a '*realist*' *aesthetic* which shares with Rousseau's theory of language the desire for a natural form of expression which seems to be produced automatically and without mediation out of that to which it refers. What it denies precisely is language – the fact that language does not simply reflect the world but is active in its constitution of the world. (p. 60, emphasis added)

This 'classic realist' aesthetic, Rose argues, stems from the nineteenth-century novel, and it gauges the "success of a book according to its ability to convince us that it is no such thing" (p. 62). It is a form of writing that "attempts to reduce to an absolute minimum our awareness of the language in which a story is written in order that we will take it for real" (p. 65). Realism, Rose concludes, "does not refer just to the content of what is described, but to a way of presenting it to the reader. Realism is a full literary convention – one which is being asserted with increasing urgency in relation to fiction for the child" (p. 65).

As is demonstrated in Rees' and Cameron's critical commentaries, the dominance of certain book-centred critical norms does appear to support Rose's argument here that a particular aesthetic has been privileged by such critics – that they have revealed a preference for a certain set of conventions, for a book that fulfils a set, expected narrative pattern. The criteria for awarding the Carnegie Medal similarly underlines this preference:

[t]he characters should be *convincing, credible*, and suitable for the ages and backgrounds of intended readers ... Dialogue should be *natural* and balanced with narration ... The plot should be constructive in that it *ties up loose ends in a secure and satisfying manner* ... The whole work should provide pleasure from the integration of the plot, style, and characters.<sup>59</sup>

Rose also has a point in observing a trend in book-centred critical discourse on child literature to protest about a "breakdown of this ['classic realist'] aesthetic in the modern adult novel", with critics and authors "arguing with increasing vehemence for its preservation in writing intended for the child" (p. 60).<sup>60</sup> Consider, for example, Cameron's comment: "[w]e remember Jack Kroll, in reviewing [Eudora] Welty's *Losing*

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<sup>59</sup> Dolores Blythe-Jones, *Children's Literature Awards and Winners: A Directory of Prizes, Authors and Illustrators* (Michigan: Neal Schumann Publishers, Gale Research Company, 1983), pp. 46-47 (emphasis added).

<sup>60</sup> Chambers makes a similar point to Rose, noting how some critics complain "about the lack of storytelling in adult novels" and turn to child books with "a sigh of relief" because such books "can and do offer the kind of story they want and can be made to go on doing so". Instead, he argues, we should be "disturbed" by the "failure to make use of the narrative movements and styles presently explored in adult literature", "Three Fallacies about Children's Books", p. 56.

*Battles*, speaking of the epic side of truth and wisdom dying out in adult fiction".<sup>61</sup> Child fiction is therefore frequently regarded by many critics as the "repository of a literary tradition under threat of disintegration in the adult world" (Rose, p. 63). Rose observes, for example, how child writing is increasingly being discussed in terms of "tradition", "culture" and "trust", terms that again carry a "specific ideology of writing and its function". "The equivalent position in relation to adult fiction", she continues, "would be that of F. R. Leavis who set out to establish the 'great tradition' of English novel writers". Literature becomes the "chief battleground in the attempt to preserve our culture from imminent decay" (p. 61). Child fiction therefore has a role in "prolonging or preserving – not only for the child but also for us – values which are constantly on the verge of collapse" (p. 44). (I will discuss something of Leavis' critical influence in the following chapter.)

"The writing that is currently being promoted for children", Rose concludes, "is that form of writing which asks its reader to enter into the story and to take its world as real, without questioning how that world has been constituted, or where, or who, it comes from" (p. 62). Egoff provides an ideal example of such a viewpoint, "if only the [child literature] writer can make pain and sorrow and joy universal, so that every reader can say of the protagonist 'That's me!' and of the theme 'I know it's true'".<sup>62</sup> "[C]hildren are *valued*", Rose continues, "because of the ease with which they slip into the book and live out the story" (pp. 62-63) – this recalls Cameron's "fresh and new and malleable" child.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Rose has a point concerning the underlying ethical and political implications of a 'classic realist' aesthetic in communicating what are often presented as unproblematic and self-evident truths (in a way that might restrict/manipulate response). As I have discussed, Cameron and Rees regard the best book for children as also that which does the child "most good", that is, the book that "secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effect" (Rose, p. 2). As Cameron comments, if we want to "help children discriminate" and "agree that influencing is possible", we should "choose books that bring them enlargements and illuminations woven through *attention-holding* stories".<sup>64</sup> For this reason, Rose concludes that child fiction (and some criticism on child literature) "seems to be circumscribed by a moralism which goes way beyond the more transparent didacticism and pedagogy of its earliest modes and into the heart of writing" (p. 139).

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61 "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part II", p. 572.

62 "Precepts and Pleasures: Changing Emphases in the Writing and Criticism of Children's Literature" in *Only Connect*, 1st ed, eds. Egoff *et al.*, p. 437.

63 "A Question of Taste", p. 61.

64 "A Question of Taste", p. 61 (emphasis added). Rose observes that "[realist] narrative is almost always described in terms of its ability to secure the *identification* of the child with the story" (p. 62).

However, while Rose's critique is an important one (hence this overview of her position), there are problems with her somewhat reductive treatment of the concept of 'classic realism'.<sup>65</sup> It is therefore important to qualify my comments here.

*(b) Problems with the concept of 'classic realism'*

A range of problems surround the concept of the 'classic realist' (or so-called 'closed') text in terms of its definition and use (as well as with the privileging of the 'anti-realist', or so-called 'open', text to take the place of the 'classic realist' text). These problems have been well canvassed by critics.<sup>66</sup> The use of terms like 'classic realism' and 'open'/closed' texts also has an institutional, cultural history that needs to be appreciated. Relevant issues here include appreciating the *strength* of the reaction (over-compensation?) against the perceived dominance of 'classic realism' and of approaches of critics like Leavis, as well as the particularly Anglo-American reception of the French poststructuralist theory of critics such as Roland Barthes and his notions of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts, as popularised and arguably *over-simplified* by critics like Eagleton,<sup>67</sup> Catherine Belsey,<sup>68</sup> Umberto Eco,<sup>69</sup> Colin MacCabe,<sup>70</sup> and Stephen Heath.<sup>71</sup> The tensions in these terms – 'classic realism' and 'open'/closed' texts – will become more apparent as I progress through this thesis (particularly in Chapter 6 when I discuss the work of Rose, Hunt and Stephens in greater detail) but some initial points should be made here. (The following discussion canvasses a number of difficulties with the terms 'classic realism' and 'open' and 'closed' texts. It is important to emphasise that Rose is aware of and avoids many of these difficulties.)

First, it is important to be careful about the implication that there are some (naïve) readers who do accept the world created in the book as real, particularly while oneself assumes a privileged position from which one is able to expose (and is immune from) the

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65 There are also problems, as I will discuss in Chapter 6 with Rose's somewhat reductive treatment of the concept of ethical critique. She appears to have difficulties with such critique, implying that it is not a legitimate form of criticism.

66 Norris, for example, speaks of "that much-maligned mythical entity, the 'classic realist text'", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 29. See also, on this point, Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988) and Iain Wright, "'What Matter Who's Speaking?': Beckett, the Authorial Subject and Contemporary Critical Theory", *Comparative Criticism*, ed. E. S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 59-86.

67 See *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, particularly pp. 135-136.

68 See *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980).

69 See *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), particularly "The Poetics of the Open Work", pp. 47-66.

70 See *Tracking the Signifier, Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 34-45.

71 See *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek Books, 1972), particularly pp. 30-37. It is interesting that MacCabe and Heath are editors of the series (Language, Discourse and Society) within which Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan* was published.

ethical/political distortions of texts, distortions that are hidden from these other readers. Rose has commented that 'classic realist' texts "reduce to an absolute minimum *our* awareness of language in which a story is written in order that *we* will take it for real" (p. 65, emphasis added) but clearly *she* has been able to resist this process. The 'child reader' has frequently been constructed as a reader who is taken in by 'classic realist' texts. Rose states, for example, that 'classic realist' texts secure "the identification of the child with something to which it does not necessarily belong. And it does so without the child being given the chance to notice, let alone question, the smoothness and ease of that process" (p. 63). As I will discuss in later chapters, Rose in this way appears to emphasise reader identification and to deny agency and resistance. Booth's comment is also relevant in this context, that the "ideal of refusing to play the human roles offered us by literature, is never realized by *any* actual reader who reads a compelling fiction for the sake of reading it" (p. 256, emphasis added). He makes the point that we therefore need to reconsider the claim that identification with characters and stories is always wrong and harmful (p. 239).

Second, the 'classic realist' aesthetic, of which Rose is critical, stems she suggests from the nineteenth-century novel. It is therefore important to be clear in defining this use of the term 'classic realist' as referring to a particular set of *conventions* about writing that (supposedly) characterised the nineteenth-century novel form – such as closed endings, convincing and clearly defined characters, reductive(?) moral judgements, and clearly proclaimed political programs – as well as, more fundamentally, to a particular set of assumptions about language, meaning, truth and reality. However, it would be misleading to go on to suggest, as have some critics, that such texts must therefore be without a self-reflexive aspect and other innovative elements – it is simply that critics have not emphasised these characteristics. As I will discuss, this has frequently led to the misleading view that the critic/author must choose between either 'realism' or 'experimentation'. Another danger, in this context, is in transforming a criticism of 'classic realism' achieved through the use of certain stylistic techniques into a hostility towards all texts that seek to be *realistic*.

Third, the assumptions about language, meaning, truth and reality underpinning terms such as 'classic realism' need to be very carefully considered. Contemporary theories about these concepts and so-called 'anti-realist'/metafictional' texts have been important in making visible a number of assumptions that, to use Raymond Tallis' expression, were hitherto passed "on the nod".<sup>72</sup> John Ellis' point is also relevant, that the "attempts to

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<sup>72</sup> *In Defence of Realism*, p. 213. Tallis, while rightly critical of some of the assumptions underpinning the notion of a 'classic realist' aesthetic, concedes that "[a]nti-realist fiction and the debate it has occasioned have forced ... [us] to look critically at the habits and rituals and rules and assumptions of realism. Those once-innovatory techniques that have become embalmed as routines are made visible by the anti-realist challenge, as also are the metaphysical, ideological and social

redefine the relationship between language and reality" can trigger "a reflex reaction of fear that the relationship is being cut completely, and outraged naive realism strikes back without thinking".<sup>73</sup> While the problems with a naive realism are clear (it is also something of a 'straw target' position that critics have become expert at knocking down), there are more complex issues to be raised here in regard to reality and truth claims, as I will discuss in later chapters.

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What could be termed a 'poststructuralist' viewpoint<sup>74</sup> holds that language is unstable – the link between a word concept (a 'signified') and a word sound (a 'signifier') is arbitrary (a product of linguistic convention) and differential (what one word *is* is dependent as much on what it is not) – and that language does not simply refer to things in the world and label them (word concepts achieve their meaning not by corresponding to things in the world but rather by the place they take within the language system and by their differentiation from each other). This viewpoint has consequent difficulties for conceptions of language, meaning, reality, truth and knowledge. But what are these consequent difficulties?

While poststructuralist critics "start from the pluralism of language games and forms of life, not all agree that this is an *irreducible* pluralism of *incommensurable* language games".<sup>75</sup> It is *where* critics strike out on the difficult path from this point then that often becomes confused and confusing and needs very careful exposition. One problem, for example, is that of some contemporary critics jumping, as Ellis has rightly observed, "from one extreme (meaning is a matter of fixed, immutable concepts) to the other (meaning is a matter of the indeterminate, infinite play of signs)".<sup>76</sup> In this way, it is often implied, for example, that 'classic realist' texts (and the critics/readers who privilege such texts) must always assume the naive view that 'literature (language) is a mirror or window onto a stable reality' (with more sophisticated and interesting insights on

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assumptions that have hitherto been passed 'on the nod' ... Behind much anti-realism is a protest on behalf of a reality that is being traduced by fictions in the grip of stylistic tricks the author has borrowed without being fully aware of having done so, of mannerisms that imply a certain metaphysic of the self or a certain world picture when neither of those has been thought through or even consciously considered" (p. 213). Against this background, I therefore agree with Rose that there are aspects of book-centred criticism, the carryover of certain norms concerning language and meaning for example, that need to be opened up for question.

73 *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), footnote 36, p. 48.

74 I am using this terminology to broadly encompass a wide range of positions in contemporary literary theory, noting the multiplicity of these positions and the problems with such categorisations. My description here of a 'poststructuralist' viewpoint is also deliberately broad and couched in what I acknowledge to be highly debateable terms.

75 *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Kenneth Baynes *et al.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 7.

76 *Against Deconstruction*, p. 66.

language and reference often being screened out).<sup>77</sup> In assuming the other extreme – 'the infinite deferral of the signified' so that we have a 'limitless undecidability of meaning' – a number of critics have not fully thought through the implications of this position, with serious self-contradictions emerging in their discourse, as I will later discuss.

Again, this is to touch upon a range of issues I want to explore in greater depth in later chapters.

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Fourth, there is an inherent contradiction in maintaining the instability of language and meaning (and consequently the variety in different readers' responses to the text) while simultaneously maintaining the stability of the concept of the 'classic realist' text (and consequently homogeneity in different readers' responses to the text). 'Classic realist'/'closed' texts (as with *all* texts) are still open to many readings and 'open' texts (as with *all* texts) still constrain readers to some extent. Rose's notion of a 'classic realist' aesthetic is therefore contradictory as well as overly reductive. The 'classic realist' text tends to be cast as a stable, unchanging, timeless entity – as *all* bad, *always* 'closed' and *always* repressive of the reader. Contrary to Rose's major concern to emphasise the unstable nature of language, this has the effect of denying the play of language that occurs for readers in all texts ('classic realist' as well as 'anti-realist') and casts readers as always being constrained by the text (issues to which I will return in later chapters). In this way, she appears to emphasise reader identification and deny reader agency and resistance.

Fifth, there is a problem in automatically linking 'classic realist'/'closed' texts with a repressive ethics and politics, and privileging 'anti-realist'/'open' texts as automatically having a progressive ethics and politics. 'Open' texts are frequently viewed as having somehow shaken off the manipulating tendencies of 'closed' texts. Booth is highly critical of this lumping together of 'openness' and a progressive ethics and politics. While, as he agrees, 'open-ended' texts might be "admirable primarily *because* of the special openings they create", there is a problem with "turning that admirable effect of

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<sup>77</sup> Having said this, the (naive) assumption that the 'classic realist' text enables an 'objectively observed objective reality/truth' to be conveyed with little distortion from one consciousness (that of the author) to another (that of the reader) is certainly evident in Cameron's discourse. She states for example that, in *Charlotte's Web*, White has "created his protagonists with absolute truthfulness", "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part II", p. 575. White does not "hesitate for a moment to tell the complete truth about his appealing heroine" (pp. 575-576). *Charlotte's Web*, Cameron concludes, therefore speaks "to *all* times and not just to our own time" because of the "author's ability to invest a tale for children with wisdom and truth" (pp. 576-577, emphasis added). Cameron has therefore been drawn into assuming a somewhat limited position (although this is not to push all book-centred criticism into this position) but Ellis' point still stands that in critically engaging with such a position, it is important not to be drawn into an equally unconsidered position at the opposite extreme.

some works on some readers into a general goal for all praise-worthy narratives" (p. 61). In adopting such a position, critics fall into contradiction for, on the one hand, they "celebrate freedom and variety in readers' responses" and, on the other hand, they "assume that certain privileged literary techniques and forms are invariably better for readers than certain others" (p. 67).<sup>78</sup> Further, as Booth emphasises, no literary work is entirely open: "every use of language carries freight" (p. 62). All texts have hidden assumptions – this is a problem with every text, not just 'classic realist' texts. There is also a danger in 'open' texts and the critical approaches that privilege such texts being perceived as without ethical/political implications – as somehow politically/ethically *neutral* because they are politically/ethically informed.

And sixth, there is also a danger in suggesting that so-called 'classic realist' conventions should simply be replaced with new 'metafictional' ones (the resort to 'either-or-ism'), something that Rose avoids but other critics (such as Hunt and Stephens) do not. This is not to say that these terms 'open'/'closed' and 'classic realist'/'anti-realist' are not useful but that placed in opposition to one another and used uncritically they become problematic. As Iain Wright comments, such an approach is representative of a "characteristic over-polarization of our interpretive options" and frequently "the slogan is shouted loudly in order to drown the sounds of the conceptual structure coming apart".<sup>79</sup>

I want to come back to some of these points in later chapters but will now turn to book-centred critical discourse on Garner's work.

### Issues in book-centred criticism: Garner<sup>80</sup>

Implicit in Townsend's commentary on Garner is again the assumption that child literature should be assessed by the same critical standards as adult literature, standards that centre on determining the 'literary merit' of the text. "In criticism", Townsend has stated elsewhere, "there is no criterion except literary merit".<sup>81</sup> 'Literary merit' is similarly

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<sup>78</sup> Booth rightly questions why originality should be the *only* value, and the freedom that is being extolled be limited to the freedom *only* to have experimental texts. And, given that, "as the reader-responers have rightly insisted, each of us can draw quite diverse values from what we call the same story, depending on our age and circumstance", is it not "curious that those who are properly alert to readers' diversity in other contexts seem to forget it when they hail the psychic boon of 'open' works" (p. 69). Open-ended techniques instead "provide, for all readers on all conceivable reading occasions, and in contrast to the old intrusive omniscient authoritarian methods, just what we all most need" (p. 67). Wright also comments that such an approach "which was initially liberating ... at first takes itself too literally, and then becomes actively repressive, and ends by refusing that very plurality of reading possibilities which it had set out to champion", "What Matter Who's Speaking", p. 59.

<sup>79</sup> "What Matter Who's Speaking", p. 60 and p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> Book-centred critical discourse on Garner's work, as I will discuss, reveals similar concerns to the book-centred critical discourse on Dahl's work. My comments in this section will therefore be in a more summarised form.

<sup>81</sup> "Didacticism in Modern Dress", p. 62.



defined to exclude certain texts and certain critical approaches, such as those that bring issues of child readership into focus, consistent with his maxim that a "good children's book must not only be pleasing to children: it must be a good book in its own right".<sup>82</sup> Townsend is therefore critical of Garner's earlier books that are popular with child readers. Garner's first book, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, is an "easy, gripping read" while his later work, such as *Red Shift* for example, is "complex and intricate" and "makes heavy demands on the reader's intelligence, concentration and background knowledge".<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Rees observes that *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and its sequel, *The Moon of Gomerath*, are not "particularly interesting or profound". Both novels are like "any hackneyed thriller or TV serial; they merely hold the reader's attention by placing the good characters in one dangerous situation after another and then rescuing them".<sup>84</sup>

Consider also Cameron's negative appraisal of *The Owl Service*, "the number of cliché phrases and expressions is truly astonishing", their use is taken to "such an extreme that they strike us as almost an ingratiating with that ten-to-eighteen age group Mr Garner says he is writing for: as if he were slanting his book, and this is a regrettable impression".<sup>85</sup> To support this statement, Cameron quotes from Garner's own comments about writing the opening chapters of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*: "[a]t that stage", writes Garner, "I was indeed writing for children and the result was the usual condescending pap. Luckily I saw this in the first month, and thereafter wrote for myself."<sup>86</sup> What Garner was expressing, Cameron observes, was the "conviction that his work for children demanded writing which he himself as critic could respect" (p. 426). Similarly, Rees asks of Garner's early books, "[w]hy are these novels so unmemorable? ... [because] they are written *specifically for children*" (p. 57, emphasis added).

Connected to this rejection of Garner's popular texts is again the rejection of a child-centred approach to child literature, an approach that threatens to undermine what are also

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82 *Written for Children* (1983), p. 13. This recalls Margery Fisher's comment about Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* representing "landmarks" because they can "engage a reader of nine or so and ... satisfy the most exacting adult reader", "Review of the *Stone Book Quartet*", *Margery Fisher Recommends Classics for Children and Young People* (London: Thimble Press, 1986), p. 65. Similarly, Frank Eyre observes that Garner's books herald "a new category" of book "that can be read with equal enjoyment by both children and adults", *British Children's Books in the Twentieth Century*, rev. ed. (London: Longman, 1971), p. 35. See also my earlier footnote 19 on this point.

83 Townsend, "Alan Garner", p. 82. Further references will be in the text.

84 Rees, "Hanging in Their True Shapes: Alan Garner", p. 56. (Further references will be in the text.) Hunt has criticised Rees for his contradictory statements here on Garner (see Hunt's "Criticism and Pseudo-Criticism", p. 20), Rees having earlier praised child literature author Penelope Lively for the same practice of seeking to "hold the reader's attention": "[Lively] is capable of putting together an exciting narrative ... which, if nothing else, will keep the reader turning the pages to see what happens. This is no achievement to be scorned". Hunt quotes Rees, "Time Present and Time Past: Penelope Lively", *Marble in the Water*, p. 128.

85 "The Owl Service: A Study", pp. 431-432. Further references will be in the text.

86 Cameron quotes Garner, "A Bit More Practice", rpt. in *The Cool Web*, eds. Meek et al., p. 197.

perceived as *established* 'literary' standards. Similarly, underpinning this notion is the belief that all readers or at least the particular group of readers/critics will (should) value a text in the same way (and by doing so therefore come to value the same texts):

even given Garner's knowledge and his particular qualities as a writer, neither *The Weirdstone* nor *The Moon of Gomerath* can begin to compare with the first fantasies of Lucy Boston ... or Philippa Pearce when it comes to subtlety and depth. It may be that the average child devoted to fantasy will prefer Garner's books for their movement, their tension, and continuous threat of evil about to be fully unleashed. But *I am speaking of artistry from the point of view of the critical adult who is considering the following elements: a combination of cleanness and strength of structure ... [and a] sense of reality.* (p. 425, emphasis added)

As Cameron's commentary confirms, and Rees' and Townsend's commentaries reinforce, it is the "critical adult's" appreciation of the text that matters in the appraisal of child literature. Hence, the praise for Garner's later books. The appreciation of other (child-centred) adult readers/critics and particularly of child readers is irrelevant.

Similarly, Cameron's commentary here also confirms Rose's point concerning critics' preference for a so-called 'classic realist' aesthetic (or rather for a particular set of narrative conventions) – for texts that are realistic in a way that Cameron wants them to be realistic. Particular emphasis is placed here on characterisation. Rees maintains, for example, that the "cardboard" characters in *Elidor* are the "major flaw": [t]heir speech does not serve to differentiate character, nor does it always sound very realistic" (p. 59). Similarly, Townsend observes that the "strengthening of the human element in *The Owl Service* is in fact a key difference between that book and the three earlier novels". With this later book, "the author is concerned with the emotional realities of a situation existing here and now. In earlier books, the people were little more than pawns" (p. 86).

Hence, of *The Owl Service* (for Townsend, "the most remarkable novel to appear on a British children's list in the 1960s" [p. 88]), he comments: "it seems that Gwyn and his mother Nancy are the living and breathing likenesses of real people" and the "underlying nullness of Roger's father Clive [is] wholly credible" (p. 87). *The Owl Service*, he concludes, is "essentially a human story, and if he had been so minded Garner could have done without any element of fantasy at all" (p. 87). The implication here is perhaps that these fantastic elements call greater attention to the book as a fictional construct (a made thing)<sup>87</sup> and this might prevent readers from entering the story, taking its world as real, and unquestionably accepting its values as norms. Again, there is a danger here of the child reader being constructed as a naive reader who will be taken in by 'classic realist'

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<sup>87</sup> It is important not to over-generalise here, however, for as Rose rightly emphasises 'realism' and 'fantasy' do not belong at opposite ends of a spectrum of writing (pp. 64-65). I will come back to this point shortly.

texts. As Townsend states, "[y]ou can expect from the reading child ... *far more willingness to live the story*".<sup>88</sup>

Townsend also has difficulties with the two story-lines in *Red Shift* that are set in the past because they interrupt the forward-moving, contemporary and, for Townsend, more realistic narrative line:

[f]or all the ingenuity with which the three stories are woven together, I feel that the relationship of the earlier two to the contemporary one is not fully organic. This last, which is the outer and clearly the principal story, stands up perfectly well without the others. They add, but they do not inhere. They could be removed from the book and the outer story would still be there. (p. 90)

As Neil Philip rightly observes, such a view appears to be "the result of the reader's search for a book that fulfils a set, expected narrative pattern rather than a flaw in *Red Shift*".<sup>89</sup> The 'experimental' nature of Garner's books is therefore considered as unsuitable, not in the sense of being too difficult for (child) readers but rather as undermining certain aesthetic (and ethical/political) values.

In this particular regard, it seems that Garner's first two books, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomerath*, are of less concern because of their more conventional (familiar) narrative structure with which it is assumed (child) readers will readily identify. And this is what Townsend in fact confirms: the "ordinary" and "uninteresting" characters of Colin and Susan in these first two books "did not matter so much; Colin and Susan were just 'a boy and girl', and could even be seen as blank spaces into which readers could insert themselves" (p. 86). Further, these books are made more "credible" by their setting – "the background is the Cheshire countryside around Alderney Edge: firm, hard, topographically accurate. It is so plainly authentic that it gives the illusion of *authenticating* the story; *though in any case the reader is given little time in which to stop and doubt*" (p. 83, emphasis added). When Garner's books move away from a realistic setting, a chronological narrative, and clearly defined and realistically portrayed characters, this evidently becomes a problem because it encourages (child) readers to "stop and doubt".

Like Townsend, Cameron and Rees also have difficulty with the 'experimental'/'anti-realist' elements in Garner's books, with their "puzzles and dissatisfactions" that demand "excessively close attention" (Rees, p. 65 and p. 61). Rees highlights for particular attention the "obscurity" that surrounds the ending of *Elidor* ("the first example in Garner's work of an obscurity that bedevils much of the two subsequent books" [p. 60]) and the unresolved relationship between Jan and Tom, the two main characters in *Red*

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88 "The Present State of English Children's Literature" in *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 1st ed, eds. Egoff *et al.*, pp. 414-415 (emphasis added).

89 *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner*, p. 87.

*Shift* (p. 65). Garner, he concludes, simply tries too hard in his writing. In order to write *The Owl Service*, Rees relates how Garner put himself on a two year course of Welsh geology, geography and economic and political history, learned Welsh and studied Welsh poetry. Similarly, *Red Shift* involved "nearly seven years of unbroken work" and "a bibliography of something like two hundred books". Is it possible, Rees asks, that "those hundreds of books, got in the way rather than helped" and that they show up as "self-conscious research" in the text (pp. 64-65)? It is clearly this *self-conscious* aspect of Garner's texts that most concerns Rees and Cameron.

When Cameron argues that books must have "a sense of reality" (p. 425) clearly this must be an *acceptable* representation of reality. The real must be represented through an established (authorised) set of narrative conventions. Hence, Cameron maintains that Garner's texts are, at times, in danger of being *too realistic* and of again posing a challenge to these preferred conventions, of the "too faithful echoing of reality" resulting in "an injury to art" (p. 431). She suggests that Garner "makes tedious" his use of dialogue by his "persistence in using a rhythm which could just possibly be used among his particular characters but which, in art, in created work, strikes insistently on the inner ear to the point of exhaustion" (p. 432). "It is no use protesting", Cameron concludes, "[that] this is the way people – especially teenagers talk.' Art is selective; the artist *must* select, for strict naturalism is a dead end" (p. 432).

Garner's too realistic/naturalistic and therefore (to Cameron) *unconventional* dialogue, in drawing attention to itself, destroys the illusion of reality and interrupts the book's attention-holding possibilities. *The Owl Service* fails to "hold together as a unified structure" and the "tedium" of Garner's dialogue, Cameron claims, "results in weariness on the part of the reader and an ensuing *lack of attention*" (p. 432, emphasis added).

In Cameron's commentary on Dahl's work, the 'sub-literary' label carried with it the charge that Dahl's work posed some kind of threat to the ethical/political, as well as aesthetic, values upheld in 'literature'. This overtly ethical/political aspect of Cameron's critical discourse on Dahl is much less obvious in her commentary on Garner, possibly because she perceives Garner's work as more subversive of aesthetic values (and less subversive of ethical/political values) where Dahl's work is much more openly subversive of ethical/political values. In his commentary on Garner, Townsend clearly privileges a child literature that upholds certain aesthetic values but, as I will discuss in the following chapter, he does not engage in *overt* ethical/political critique. He does not *openly* favour, as does Cameron, a child literature that upholds certain ethical/political values. In fact, Townsend rejects an ethical/political approach as falling outside 'literary criticism'. There are many problems with such a stance.

**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by book-centred critics, and what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?: book-centred critics' investment in the notion of the 'critical adult'**

To sum up, this discussion has explored the first question outlined in my Introduction in regard to book-centred critical discourse on Dahl's and Garner's work. Certain themes have emerged. The question these themes in turn raise (leaving aside until the next chapter the issue of what merits inquiry in the broader philosophical/theoretical assumptions that inform the book-centred critical approach) is what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics: what might be the adult critic's investment here?

To explore the adults' investment in these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse, it is useful to examine what might be the disparity between critics' acknowledged (stated) wants and their unspoken (unexamined) wants. As the contradictions and inconsistencies in book-centred critical discourse demonstrate there is a sub-text in their writing about child literature. One major contradiction that emerges (I will discuss other examples in Chapter 2) is that, while in theory a rejection of child readers is at the heart of the book-centred critical project, in practice child readers appear to be very much the focus of critics' concerns – primarily because it is impossible for critics to finally shut out these readers. Book-centred critics are unable to maintain in practice what they have set out to do in theory. This sets up so many questions about their critical practice, that book-centred criticism is rapidly undermined.

While the terms book- and child-centred have been widely accepted as a way of classifying the different critical approaches to child literature, a more detailed examination of these approaches demonstrates that it is not simply a matter of a critic being *either* book-centred *or* child-centred. Cameron adopts a book-centred stance where 'literary merit' is viewed as an inherently textual quality but, as her interaction with Merrick demonstrates, she also privileges the critical adult *reader* in discerning these literary values. Further, in associating certain ethical/political values with 'literary merit', Cameron is also concerned with whether a given work of child literature is suitable in its subject matter – that is, with whether it is suitable in its subject matter *for child readers*. She therefore finally undermines her approach because, in discussing this issue, she needs to refer to the (presumed) responses of child readers, albeit a generalised/idealised 'child reader', to reinforce her point. This creates a number of problems for Cameron's approach. These problems are further compounded by the admission, in a later essay, that there might indeed be a gap between the critical adult's appraisal of 'the child reader's' response to the book and child readers' *own* responses to the book: "children, when

they're young, aren't particularly aware of sadism as such, or see it differently from the way an adult sees it and so call *Charlie* 'a funny book'".<sup>90</sup>

An assessment of Dahl's books, by 'critical adults', reveals them to be sadistic, and this is a quality in the text that will prove malign for all child readers, as 'critical adults' will (should) agree. But adult critic, Anne Merrick, does not agree and child readers, by Cameron's own admission, might find otherwise. While, in undertaking ethical/political critique of adult literature, Booth might perhaps see little validity in child readers' views of the text (considering his preference for [academically?] 'qualified observers'), he does accept that there are plural views to be taken into account (albeit it a pluralism with limits) and that these views have validity. Cameron, however, pursues an "inherently reductive quest for qualities that will prove benign or malign for all readers in all circumstances" (Booth, p. 56), based on an appeal to a single judgement (that of the 'critical adult'), a position that ultimately she cannot maintain. She cannot dismiss a text as harmful without considering the different experiences/opinions that different readers might have (whether these readers are other adult critics or child readers) and, having considered these opinions, she cannot dismiss a text as harmful in any absolute sense.

Accordingly, her book-centred criticism is not purely text-centred. It does not ignore issues of child readership and the (child) reader per se but rather it is reticent and selective about the level of diversity in response to the text with which it feels comfortable openly acknowledging and validating. (In a similar way, as I will discuss, child-centred criticism is not purely reader-centred.) While in theory, Cameron has dismissed any appeal to the child reader's response, in practice she appeals to the 'critical adult's' appraisal of that reader's (presumed?) response. She therefore tries to have it both ways but does not elaborate on or theorise about how she has arrived at this appraisal.

Cameron cannot finally adhere to the critical framework she has constructed for herself. Her critical commentary relies upon a series of deceptions: that (the critic's appraisal of) 'the child reader's' response to the text is irrelevant to critical practice, when in fact this appraisal (although untheorised) and this response (although generalised) is regarded as relevant, and that this untheorised appraisal of a generalised 'child reader's' response to the text matches child readers' actual responses to the text.

This raises the question of how book-centred critics have constituted this 'child reader' and why? The lack of transparency and absence of theorising about how such critics have arrived at their conception of 'the child reader' and his/her response suggests that what

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<sup>90</sup> "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature", p. 440. Cameron also concedes that *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* could be regarded as "a book on two levels, one for adults and one for children" (p. 338) – again, acknowledging two potentially different experiences of the book.

we might have here is a 'child reader' created for their own purposes. Arguably then, Cameron's comments may have little to do with actual child readers' responses to the text (whatever these might be), responses that she has dismissed as irrelevant, but may rather relate more to a generalised/idealised 'child reader' that she herself has constructed and can reliably appeal in order to lend authority to her reading of the text – a 'child reader' with known needs and responses: "Dahl caters to the streak of sadism in children which they don't even realize is there because they are not fully self-aware and are not experienced enough to understand what sadism is".<sup>91</sup>

This returns then to the question of what might be adults' investment in these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse. Rose has suggested a number of motivations that clearly have relevance to my discussion of book-centred criticism. She identifies a desire to use child literature (and the critical discourse on that literature) and an image of the (generalised/innocent) child to hold off a threat to the assumption that "language is something which can simply be organised and cohered" (p. 10), to shore up/preserve certain values (aesthetic, ethical, political) that are perceived to be under threat in modern society (p. 43), to escape from the "historical divisions" (class, gender, race) and "difficulties" (language, sexuality) of which "children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10), and to suspend questions about how our identities are implicated in language and sexual difference and about the reworking of our memories of ourselves as children and the fragility of our mastery of (sexual) identity. These issues open up multiple and complex questions about ethics and politics, and about 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers, in the context of broader questions about language and meaning.

In concluding, it is my argument that in their 'literary criticism' on child literature book-centred critics have sought to hide behind the concept of the 'critical adult' (a concept that is never theorised or made clear) in order to conceal these interests in the child (reader) and child literature, and suppress difficult theoretical and philosophical questions raised by the concept of child readers' responses to the book. The best child books are those with 'literary merit', that is, those texts that the 'critical adult' regards as good. In this way, such critics are able to bring the child and certain aesthetic, ethical and political values into close relation without making their interests in the child apparent (critics having explicitly renounced any interest in the child reader) or having those values questioned (approved by 'critical adults', these values have become naturalised and rendered innocent). It is on this issue that I will expand my discussion in Chapter 2.

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91 "A Question of Taste", p. 61.

## Issues in child-centred criticism: Dahl

It is not my intention, in questioning book-centred criticism, to seek some kind of crude reversal whereby child-centred criticism will gain the ascendancy. Both approaches are problematic and require further discussion. Nor is it my intention, in questioning the notion of a standard of 'literary merit' as established by the 'critical adult', to seek a reversal of this standard along the lines that, because this is '*children's literature*', child readers' responses alone (and child-centred criticism) should instead determine the value of the child text. The issue is not that simple.

### *Acknowledging the critical validity of child readers' responses to the text and of the notion of popular appeal*

The primary assumption underpinning Merrick's commentary (the first critic to write at length on Dahl's work from a child-centred perspective) is that since adults and children respond differently to books, child readers' responses to the text should at least be a consideration in a critical appraisal of that text:

[a]s a primary school teacher with a particular interest in language and literature who has worked extensively with many of the recently written and highly acclaimed works of fiction for children, I have been struck with the fact that children do not necessarily share adult views about the quality of books. (p. 21)

The best child book appears to be regarded by Merrick as that which child readers regard as good: "I have read *Charlie* to children of eight and over and it has never failed to delight" (p. 29). Inherent in this position also appears to be a challenge to the book-centred critics' concept of established 'literary' standards based on the consensus view of a privileged group of readers ('critical adults'), a call for a re-evaluation of those standards in recognition of the plural nature of response. (And yet, as I will discuss, Merrick constantly compromises her position here.) Accordingly, she highlights those features of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* that, based on her experience in the classroom, are likely to appeal to children. However, it is on the highly questionable notion that the fairy tale has an automatic appeal to 'the child' that Merrick bases her claims.

### *'Natural' connection between the fairy tale and 'the child'*

The link between Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the fairy tale or (folktale) is singled out as the major reason for the book's appeal to child readers:

[c]hildren can grasp things quite out of their experience, but there must be some point of contact and this in fact accounts for the success of *Charlie* ... The fantasy, though beyond their actual experience, has much in common with familiar literary experience, fairy tales [and] folklore. (p. 29)



The plot has "close affinities with *Cinderella* in that it concerns an undeservedly poor and oppressed child winning through to riches by the intervention of a kind of magic" and "a fairy godfather in the shape of Mr Willy Wonka" (p. 25). The chocolate factory resembles "well-known fairy castles and prince's palaces" and children "easily identify with the passive Charlie as they always identify with the oppressed hero or heroine of the fairy tale" (p. 29). Merrick concludes that the book's "strength" depends "on the assumptions of folklore and common storytelling ... it appeals to all 'classes' of children, who recognize in it much that they have met before" (p. 30).

The assumption underpinning Merrick's commentary is that a child book with particularly strong links to the fairy tale will automatically appeal to child readers: "*Charlie* has the robust, folk qualities that make its appeal much broader" (p. 30). This in turn implies some kind of natural connection between the fairy tale and children: "[children] can look back at and delight in the world of *Charlie* – fairy tale and nursery rhyme that they loved when younger – even though the process may not be very conscious" (p. 30).<sup>92</sup> That there is a natural affinity between children and the fairy tale has been soundly questioned – Lewis, for example, observes that the "whole association of fairy tale and fantasy with childhood is local and accidental".<sup>93</sup> Rose also points to this "strange complicity" between the "archaic status of the fairy tale" and the idea of the child "as a true, unconscious recipient of its meaning" (p. 19).<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Felicity Hughes has observed that "many critics rely on some version of the 'culture epoch' theory which states that individual human development recapitulates the development of the race". According to such a view, "children are primitives and are most appropriately served by primitive literature – myths, fables, folk tales and fairy tales".<sup>95</sup>

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92 This recalls Bruno Bettelheim's claim that "the child understands [the meaning of the fairy tale] intuitively, though he does not 'know' it explicitly", and that the fairy tale deals with "universal human problems", *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 179 and p. 6. Bettelheim's work has been much criticised for such claims, see for example critiques by Nicholas Tucker, "Dr Bettelheim and Enchantment", *Signal*, 43 (1984), pp. 32-41, and James Helsig, "Bruno Bettelheim and the Fairy Tales", *Children's Literature*, 6 (1977), pp. 93-114.

93 "On Three Ways of Writing for Children", rpt. in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Haviland, p. 234. See also J. R. R. Tolkien, "[c]hildren as a class – except in common lack of experience they are not one – neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do", "Children and Fairy Stories" in *Only Connect*, eds. Egoff *et al.*, p. 112.

94 See also Alan Richardson's essay on this point, "Wordsworth, Fairy Tales, and the Politics of Children's Reading", in *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth Century England*, ed. James Holt McGavran (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), pp. 34-58.

95 "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice" in *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, ed. Hunt, p. 86. Tony Watkins, in an article on Garner's work, provides a good example of such a view: "[t]he importance of myths for children is now generally accepted ... [they] contain the roots of our culture – roots that affect both the social and personal lives of our children, who possess the past within them", "Alan Garner", rpt. in *Good Writers for Young Readers*, ed. Dennis Butts (St Albans: Hart-Davis Educational, 1977), p. 45.

*Reinforcing 'literary merit': 'fantasy' = 'child appeal' = 'popular fiction'/'realism' = 'adult appeal' = 'literature'*

It might be expected that child-centred critics, in acknowledging the critical validity of child readers' responses to the text and of the notion of popular appeal, would challenge book-centred critics' concept of 'literary merit' based on the exclusion of texts popular with children and of child readers' responses to the text. However, as Merrick's commentary demonstrates, there is a tendency to instead fall into an oppositional stance that simply shores up this concept. A particularly good example of this is the way that 'fantasy' is awarded by Merrick a lesser status than 'realistic' fiction<sup>96</sup> and therefore relegated to child readers (as being of value to child readers but not of value to adult readers). In this way, the book-centred concept of 'literary merit' remains intact because child readers' responses to the text and the notion of popular appeal are segregated from the issue of what constitutes 'literary merit'. The books awarded the higher status of 'literary merit' are those valued by adults rather than by children and that shun 'childish' fairy tale elements for more realist elements. Hence, Merrick ultimately confers 'literary' status on Cresswell's *The Nightwatchmen* and not on Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – "like many adults, I feel a rooted dislike for Roald Dahl's book and believe Helen Cresswell's to be of high literary quality" (p. 21) – primarily because Cresswell's book is more realistic (the characters' dialogue seems "natural and vital" [p. 22], the "fantasy is always contained in the reality" [p. 23] and it is not "fairy tale fantasy completely divorced from life" but the "revelation of imaginative possibilities which exist in the ordinary and not quite ordinary things that lie around us" [p. 25]) and has more appeal for adult readers: "I shall introduce [it]", Merrick states, "to a small group of advanced readers" (p. 30).

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, however, is a completely different case. As Merrick observes, it is "an escape from reality" (p. 29) rather than 'realistic': "the fantasy is very much that of a fairy story – something quite outside ordinary life (p. 25) and the chocolate factory is "something quite beyond ordinary experience; its fantasy is not one that is or might be implicit in reality but something apart from it (p. 28). It is also more popular with children than with adults, "I have read *Charlie* to children of eight and over and it has never failed to delight" (p. 29). In this context, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is therefore regarded by Merrick as of a lesser status.

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<sup>96</sup> It is important not to over-generalise here in putting up an opposition between 'fantasy' and 'realism'. Rose makes the point, for example, that the notion of a 'classic realist' aesthetic still applies to 'fantasy' fiction, referring not to the content of what is being described but rather, as Rose has suggested, "to a way of presenting it to the reader" (p. 65), to a set of literary conventions that are present both in 'realistic' and 'fantasy' fiction. As Cameron has stated, "fantasy" must have a "sense of reality", *The Owl Service: A Study*, p. 425.

Merrick's position recalls Hughes' observation about the "widespread prejudice against fantasy", that fantasy is "childish".<sup>97</sup> As Stephens also remarks, "[o]ne of the more curious sides to the criticism of children's literature is the urge to polarize fantasy and realism into rival genres, and to assert that children ... 'progress' from fantasy to realism". This trend has "solidified into an identification of seriousness with realism and a concomitant consigning of fantasy to non-serious or popular literature for those audiences, such as children, deemed incapable of complex aesthetic responses". Fantasy gives "pleasure and delight" while realism "illuminates life as it is", offers its audiences "new experiences" and helps children "to mature intellectually and emotionally".<sup>98</sup> My point is that in such a way child-centred critics have finally reinforced the book-centred critics' concept of 'literary merit' to exclude child readers' responses and popular fiction.

Merrick seeks to draw a barrier between the 'literary' status of the text and its appeal to child readers, since any attempt to merge these two aspects would inevitably result in a redefinition of the term 'literary' and the aesthetic values underpinning this term. Accordingly, child-centred criticism, like book-centred criticism, is *selective* about the level of diversity in response to the text with which it feels comfortable validating. Hence, Merrick cannot finally adhere to the child-centred position she has outlined. Like the notion of book-centred criticism, child-centred criticism is therefore misleading. It is not a simple matter of a critic being *either* text-centred *or* (child) reader-centred. Merrick adopts a (child) reader-centred stance in that she privileges the responses of adult readers (in discerning 'literary merit') and the responses of child readers, but 'literary merit' is also viewed as an objective textual quality (inherent in the book). Merrick cannot finally resolve the tension she sets up in her discourse between subjective response and an objectively defined concept.

Cameron is rightly critical of this contradictory aspect of Merrick's work, for having established her support for texts with 'literary merit', Merrick concludes by siding with child readers: "I shall certainly continue to read *Charlie* to classes for the *mutual* pleasure we receive, *sharing* the experience of an enjoyed story" (Merrick, p. 30, emphasis added).<sup>99</sup> It is not so much that Merrick wavers confusingly between supporting child readers' responses to the text and supporting her own adult response (although this is clearly a problem) but that she suggests here that her appraisal of the text and that of child readers in fact coincide when they clearly do not, as other of her comments have demonstrated. In this way, Merrick temporarily suppresses her own response to the text (as a critical adult) in favour of what she suggests are the responses of child readers. But because of the tensions in her child-centred approach, this is a 'child reader' kept firmly

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97 "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice", p. 83.

98 *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, pp. 241-242.

99 See Cameron, "A Question of Taste", p. 62.

in its place – there must be no challenge to the 'literary' status of the child book, for example, as conferred by the critical adult (the responses of child readers' have no impact on the definition of what is 'literary'). The child reader is, as Moss suggests, "non-literary"<sup>100</sup> (this is a key term as I will discuss). Merrick's wavering between exposing and concealing these problems also calls into question her mediation of child readers' responses to Dahl's work. This mediation is based on empirical evidence through her work in the classroom but it is empiricism without a clearly defined methodology and undercut by a conflicting agenda. How can we be sure, given Merrick's interest in preserving established standards of 'literary merit', that this is not again a 'child reader' constructed for her own purposes to whose response she can therefore reliably appeal? Further, as her assumptions about the link between the fairy tale and the child reveal, it is a generalised/idealised image of 'the child' that prevails in her discourse.

### *Uneasiness with ethical/political critique*

While Merrick sides with book-centred critics in terms of preserving certain aesthetic values through 'literature', she demonstrates an uneasiness with ethical/political critique. This manifests itself in a number of ways.

First, there is a suggestion that ethical/political critique falls outside 'literary criticism', indicating a deeper unease with a critical approach that is overtly ethical/political (something that is also evident in Townsend's approach as I will discuss in the next chapter). Merrick finds evidence, for example, of class bias in *The Nightwatchmen*: it has "middle class assumptions", and is "totally meaningless to children from the working class" (p. 28). In this way, Merrick's commentary appears to be moving away from the generalised concept of 'the child' that underpinned book-centred critical discourse and to be calling into question the restrictions to the plural nature of response underpinning the then definition of the term 'literary merit'. However, despite these failings, she finally maintains that *The Nightwatchmen* is of "high literary quality" (p. 21). Ethical/political critique – such as pointing to concerns about class bias – is irrelevant to 'literary criticism'. A book's 'literary' status absolves it from any critique on ethical/political grounds both in terms of those values perceived to be questionable (as in this case) as well as those perceived to be valuable.

And second, Merrick implies that fiction that is (supposedly) closest to 'the child' (such as the fairy tale) is innocent of ethical/political difficulties – 'the child' is innocent and therefore it appears that 'the *child's*' books are innocent as well. Dahl's work, because of its links with popular folklore and fairy tale, is regarded by Merrick as somehow class-less: the "strength" of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* depends "on the assumptions of

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<sup>100</sup> Part of the Pattern, p. 138.

folklore and common storytelling. As such, it appeals to all 'classes' of children, who recognize in it much that they have met before" (p. 30). Such texts are apparently innocent of class divisions and other ethical/political difficulties. Their link with the fairy tale and 'the child' cancels out the need for ethical/political critique. Such a position also implies that ethical/political issues perhaps do not matter as much in popular fiction and fairy tales because of their lower status.<sup>101</sup> As Rose earlier argued, 'the child' is also being used here to conceal "the historical divisions", such as class, "of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10).

By way of a further example here, Merrick is at first critical of Dahl's work because it is repressive of children and overly conservative. Child readers are encouraged to identify with Charlie (as Merrick notes, "children can easily identify with the passive Charlie" [p. 29]), a child character who is the model of good behaviour: "Charlie himself is a cipher, his appeal lying in ... his politeness. He is every 'inner' adult's version of a good child 'seen but not heard'" (p. 25). Similarly, she suggests that Mr Wonka "represents the conservative, traditional attitude of adults to children" – Charlie wins out in the end "not because of any positive good or noble qualities" but because he is "quiet and polite" (p. 27). However, these ethical/political objections are finally overruled because "the adult attitudes to children [in the book] are those with which they are familiar ... in common lore" (p. 29). Again, the link between Dahl's work and "common lore" (folklore/fairy tale) and hence with 'the child' seemingly absolves the book of any ethical/political difficulties.

**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by child-centred critics, and what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?: child-centred critics' investment in the notion of the 'non-literary child reader'**

To sum up, this discussion has again explored the first question outlined in my Introduction in regard to child-centred criticism (I have deferred discussion on Chamber's child-centred discourse on Garner's work until the next chapter for reasons I will shortly discuss). Certain themes have emerged although, as I have argued, *these themes are constantly being undercut* as child-centred critics waver between taking on board the full

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101 Jack Zipes has warned against ignoring the ethical/political values carried in books, even if they do resemble fairy tales, suggesting that it is "no longer possible to ignore the connection between the aesthetic components of fairy tales" and their "function within a socialisation process which forms taste, mores, values, and habits", *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. Zipes (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 2. (Zipes himself has been criticised for privileging versions of fairy tales that represent the more 'radical' political values he shares and for assuming a privileged vantage point in theory that is not subject to the diagnostic critique it exercises on opposing standpoints.) See also Nodelman, "The Hidden Meaning and the Inner Tale: Deconstruction and the Interpretation of Fairy Tales", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 15, no. 3 (1990), pp. 143-148.

implications of their position and aligning themselves with a now problematised and undermined book-centred critical position. The question this raises, to return to the second question in my Introduction, is what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics – what might be the (adult) critic's investment here?

As this discussion has illustrated, there is a marked disparity between child-centred critics' acknowledged (stated) wants and their unspoken (unexamined) wants – that is, in their theoretical acceptance of child readers' responses to the text as a valid element of 'literary criticism' but in their rejection of this position in practice.

Child-centred critics appear to have some realisation of the motivations that might lie behind book-centred criticism, in terms of constructing an image of 'the child' (and privileging a type of child literature and critical discourse on that literature) to sidestep engagement with the complexities of language and meaning, shore up certain aesthetic, ethical and political values without having those values questioned, and escape troublesome social divisions (such as race prejudice and class inequality). That such critics waver in their views is however very interesting. Contemporary critics have taken elements of the child-centred position much further and in later chapters I will explore what motivations might lie behind their position.

For this reason, I have deferred a detailed study of Chamber's commentary on Garner until Chapter 3. Although representative of a child-centred position resembling Merrick's, Chambers seeks to straddle the divide between child-centred and book-centred criticism by turning to a theoretical framework, reader-response theory, that enables a much broader discussion of the reader and text than had previously been the case.

In concluding, it is my argument that, in their criticism on child literature, child-centred critics have obscured their own and child readers' interests/involvement in the evaluation of texts by hiding behind the concept of the "non-literary" child reader (to recall Moss' term). In this way, such critics have contained and suppressed difficult theoretical and philosophical questions raised by the concept of child readers' responses to the book. In this way too, what the child-centred critic wants appears to be innocent because it is simply what 'the child' wants. The impression conveyed is that the adult is liberating child readers, giving them a greater say in what they read and how books are assessed. Again, the critic can therefore bring the child and certain aesthetic, ethical and political values into close relation without making their interests in 'the child' apparent (the critic having renounced any interest in such values constructed without reference to child readers) or having those values questioned (sanctioned by reference to the 'non-literary' child, these values have become naturalised and rendered innocent).

## Chapter 2

### Past Developments in Literary Criticism: Directions, Influences and Assumptions

#### *Closing down Issues about Language and Meaning, Ethics and Politics, and 'the Child' and Children/'the Reader' and Readers?*

A study of the developments in child literature criticism over the period 1969–1977 reveals two major trends: a book- and a child-centred approach. This chapter turns primarily to the third question set out in my Introduction – to what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform such approaches – and places this discussion in context by exploring developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced book- and child-centred criticism. Chapter 2 also briefly revisits the two questions canvassed in Chapter 1. In this way, Chapter 2 seeks to further develop the findings of the previous chapter.

#### Issues in book-centred criticism

Townsend's work is typical of the book-centred critical approach. His most significant theoretical work, "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature" (1971), will therefore act as the core text in this discussion.<sup>1</sup> I will also make reference to Hunt's "Criticism and Children's Literature" (1974).<sup>2</sup> Other significant book-centred critical texts include *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature* (1969), edited by Egoff *et al*, and Cameron's *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books* (1969).<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Townsend's "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature" is generally regarded as a key statement on book-centred critical theory. Hunt has described this essay as "a centrally important statement" in the criticism of child literature that has only recently "been surpassed", *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, p. 57. Similarly, Robert Leeson, in a critique of Townsend's essay, states that it is "the most comprehensive – and best – statement of what might be called the 'purist' position in children's book criticism", "To the Toyland Frontier", *Signal*, 16 (1975), p. 18. Focusing on Townsend's work also provides some continuity with my discussion, in the previous chapter, of book-centred critical discourse on Dahl and Garner. (I will also draw from other of Townsend's essays.)
  - 2 In "Criticism and Children's Literature", Hunt states that he is "in broad agreement" with Townsend's critical approach: "I would like to think that my article is complementary to his, and perhaps a first step on the critical road he suggests" (p. 130). (Hunt's critical approach has changed markedly over time. In Part Two of this study I will discuss his current critical position.)
  - 3 Cameron has also recently published *The Seed and the Vision: On the Writing and Appreciation of Children's Books* (New York: Dutton, 1993), reprinting several essays from her previous book. See also book-centred essays by Heins, "Out on a Limb with the Critics" and "Coming to Terms with Criticism", rpt. in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Haviland, pp. 400–407 and pp. 408–412.

Book-centred critical theory is again characterised by the assertion that child literature should be assessed as part of literature in general and therefore by the same critical standards as adult literature, with Townsend providing the representative statement of this position.<sup>4</sup> A number of other prominent book-centred critics have also stated their support for such an approach.<sup>5</sup>

The critical standards privileged by book-centred critics, as suggested in Chapter 1, clearly centre on establishing the 'literary merit' of the text, on separating 'literature' from popular reading matter. Hunt states, for example, that "we know, severally, what it [literature] is, but it is difficult to say what it is". "The loose usage of the word", he continues, "demands some sort of definition, although it is easier to say what it is not. It is not simply reading matter – educational, moral or otherwise. It is not, for example, Enid Blyton" (p. 121).<sup>6</sup>

This approach again raises difficulties with the way in which the term 'literary merit' is defined by book-centred critics. In order to uphold a criticism founded upon a standard of 'literary merit', such critics seek to exclude certain texts and certain critical approaches, such as those that bring issues of child readership into prominence:

I am not here to quarrel with those who see children's literature in terms of social or psychological adjustment, advancement of deprived or minority groups, development of reading skills, or anything else ... Different kinds of assessment are valid for different purposes. I would only remark that the viewpoints of psychologists, sociologists and educationists of various descriptions have rather little in common with each other or with those whose approach is mainly literary.<sup>7</sup>

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4 See *Written for Children* (1983), p. 13. As discussed in my Introduction, *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, edited by Egoff *et al.* and published in 1969, provides an early statement of the book-centred position (see Egoff, p. xv).

5 See, for example, Hunt, "Alice, or the Wind in the Willows ... can stand beside any other book – different in kind, perhaps, from Henry James or Tolstoy, but not to be assessed on a different scale, or read in a significantly differently way", "Criticism and Children's Literature", p. 128. (Further references will be in the text.) Cameron similarly states that "children's and adult's literature are facets of a single art, and the highest standards of one hold good for the other. Children's literature should be considered as part of all literature; the criticism of children's literature should be conducted in the same manner as the criticism of adult literature", *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, 1969), p. 228.

6 Townsend also seeks to draw a line between 'literature' and 'popular fiction': "I am less apologetic about the omission of popular but insignificant material. Ephemeral matter produced to catch a market can be highly entertaining, and may well be important to the educationalist, sociologist or social historian. But, for better or worse, this is a study of children's literature, not of children's reading-matter. It seeks to discriminate", *Written for Children* (1983), p. 14.

7 Townsend, "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature", p. 92. (Further references will be in the text.) Similarly, Heins suggests a need to distinguish "between the two different ways of approaching children's books: (1) the criticism of these books as they concern the different kinds of people who use and work with these books and (2) the literary criticism of children's literature", "Coming to Terms with Criticism", p. 412.



Townsend argues that "an atmosphere of unparalleled intellectual confusion" (p. 91) has so far surrounded the assessment of child books. The role for the 'literary' critic is therefore to set some *proper* critical standards for child fiction: "if we are to move onward from kiddy lit ... then children's books must be taken seriously *as literature*, and this means they must be considered with critical strictness" (p. 100).<sup>8</sup> By raising the status of criticism on child literature, Townsend and Hunt also hope to raise the status of child literature.<sup>9</sup> Hunt, for example, comments that, "[i]f children's books are not taken seriously, it may be because what is written about them is of such poor quality rather than because they are poor themselves".<sup>10</sup>

Both Hunt and Townsend maintain that a child-centred approach has served to lower the status of criticism on child literature. Hunt comments that "[i]t is very curious that while teachers, librarians, educationalists and psychologists respect each other's disciplines and skills, they tend to regard children's books as an area which requires no skills and no disciplines".<sup>11</sup> (Certainly, some child-centred criticism is lacking in critical rigour, as is also true of some book-centred criticism, but this fault has more to do with the absence of a clearly enunciated theoretical framework than with the principle of focusing on child readers per se.)

Townsend suggests that critics of child fiction are usually concerned with one or more of four attributes of texts: their "suitability", "popularity", "relevance" and "literary merit" (p. 96). The first three attributes he labels "child-centred" and the fourth, "book-centred" (p. 97).<sup>12</sup> Townsend rejects the child-centred approach as a valid component of 'literary

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8 Similarly, Hunt claims that "the study of children's books has suffered both in status and quality from the lack of serious critical discussion" (p. 118).

9 Cameron speaks, for example, of the "attitude of contempt" that exists towards child literature, *The Green and Burning Tree*, p. 206. See also, more recently, Robert Bator, "[k]iddiebookland ... is still not a very respectable place for author or critic", *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*, ed. Bator, p. xiv. Critics clearly have a point here for I recently came across the following statement while reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*: "[a]nyone can become a writer. With hard work anyone can achieve anything. If the worst comes to the worst I can become a children's writer. Anyone can do that", trans. Nicholas Bethall and David Burg (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 308. A number of authors of child literature have also commented on this dismissive attitude to child literature.

10 "Criticism and Pseudo-Criticism", p. 21. Townsend and Hunt have an added interest in this area because they are themselves authors of child literature.

11 "Criticism and Pseudo-Criticism", p. 15. Similarly, Townsend observes that child specialists are "notoriously willing to pronounce" on aspects of child literature "that do *not* impinge upon their own field". "Consequently", he states, "we have a flow of apparently authoritative comment by people who are undoubtedly experts but who are not actually experts on *this*" (p. 92).

12 As I will discuss, this is the first significant departure from the book-centred discourse on Garner and Dahl of Cameron and Rees considered in the previous chapter. Where Cameron and Rees were *overtly* concerned with issues of 'suitability' – whether particular child texts were suitable/unsuitable for children – Townsend considers such issues as outside 'literary criticism'. This confirms that Townsend is seeking to exclude ethical/political critique (which brings in with it issues of child readership) in order to maintain a more purist book-centred approach. By

criticism' on a number of grounds. As I mentioned, he maintains that such critics are not qualified to comment on 'literary' concerns (similarly, neither is the 'literary critic' qualified to comment on these so-called child-centred concerns: "[s]uitability, popularity, relevance – are these not questions ... above all for those who are closest to the ultimate consumer?" [pp. 98-99]). And, in direct contradiction to his earlier concession that "different kinds of assessment are valid for different purposes" (p. 92), he also argues that child-centred criticism is not only irrelevant to literary criticism but inherently flawed. Townsend states, for example, that he is in agreement with Alderson that to assess child fiction with reference to child readers' responses "'leads to a morass of contradictions and subjective responses'" (p. 98).<sup>13</sup> Such an approach, Townsend continues, involves "inevitably crude assessments of suitability" and "speculations that the book will or will not sit long on the shelf, or that it will or will not help its readers" (p. 98).<sup>14</sup> This suggests an emphasis on the text in isolation from child readers but it is an emphasis that, as I will argue, Townsend and Hunt cannot finally maintain.

*Establishing 'literary merit': 'critical adults' (should) value the same texts*

By focusing on child readers' responses to the text, the child-centred approach threatens to corrupt what are clearly regarded by book-centred critics as established 'literary' standards:

a standard of literary merit is required, and indeed in practice is accepted, as the *leading edge*, so to speak, of book assessment ... Literary standards are not fixed forever, but they are comparatively stable; that is part of their essence. Without this leading edge, this backbone if you prefer it, there can be only a jumble of criteria, a haphazard mixture of personal responses. (Townsend, p. 99)

"In literature as a whole", Hunt similarly claims, "such value judgements have been made ... [and] may now seem to be part of natural law" (p. 118). Townsend and Hunt imply that there is a stable notion of 'literature' (albeit a "comparatively stable" notion that is not "fixed forever") based upon values that are unproblematic and (should be) agreed upon by all readers – or at least agreed upon by a particular group of readers/critics. Townsend states, for example, that what matters is the "consensus of *informed opinion* over a period of time" (p. 101, emphasis added). Similarly, Hunt privileges the "discriminating adult" (p. 127). (This recalls Cameron's privileging of the 'critical adult' as discussed in the previous chapter.) Robert Leeson is particularly critical of this aspect of Townsend's work (although he somewhat exaggerates Townsend's position), arguing that the 'literary

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Townsend's definition, it is also interesting that in this particular aspect Cameron and Rees therefore become *child-centred* critics, reinforcing my point about the problems with these terms.

13 Townsend quotes here from Alderson's "The Irrelevance of Children to the Children's Book Reviewer".

14 Similarly, Hunt has observed that "[w]hatever critical theory we produce for children's literature, it will have little or nothing to do with children" (p. 119) - "it is irrelevant to consult children on the quality or value of their books, and positively dangerous to generalize from any findings" (p. 120).

tradition' on which Townsend draws is "an attempt to provide a universal and lasting standard of judgement on writing", a standard that relies upon an "intellectual consensus [that] has always been illusory".<sup>15</sup> Such standards are set by a group who "imagine that 'everyone' is like them and that what they like is good for everyone" (p. 24). While Leeson has a point, it is important to avoid falling into the charge here that Townsend is being elitist – that, as Leeson claims, Townsend is "in complacent occupation of the commanding heights of culture" (p. 24). Some individuals may agree with Townsend's position and it is just as elitist in its own way for Leeson to assume that *everyone* will dismiss Townsend's position (and therefore agree with him) as it is to suggest that everyone will support it. Book-centred critical theory, however, is clearly holding onto narrow, overly reductive concepts of 'literature', 'literary merit' and 'informed opinion', concepts it also regards as unproblematic.

*Establishing 'literary merit': preserving certain aesthetic, ethical and political values while (apparently) dismissing ethical/political critique as valid 'literary criticism'*

Townsend's position is (unconsciously) political, a range of socio-political assumptions underpin his appeal to a 'consensus of informed opinion over time' in determining what is of 'literary value'. Such a viewpoint implies a desire to preserve certain ethical, political and aesthetic values that are perceived to be under threat in society by upholding a power base of 'informed opinion'. Townsend laments, for example, the diminishing appeal of the "old imperialism" in such works as R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. "We have suffered", he observes, "a fatal loss of confidence".<sup>16</sup>

As I have suggested, however, there is a reluctance to overtly engage with these ethical/political concerns and in fact Townsend seeks to exclude from 'literary criticism' any concern with ethical/political critique. And yet, he cannot finally avoid engaging with the ethical and political (it is never possible to bracket ethics and politics entirely) and so falls into a contradictory stance. (I will defer further discussion of this issue until I turn to the question of what merits inquiry in the broader theoretical and philosophical assumptions that underpin book-centred literary criticism.)

#### *Untheorised critical position*

Townsend states that he concurs with T. S. Eliot's view (in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* [1933]), that the "rudiment of criticism is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem" (p. 101). However, the principles by which the critic is to judge what is good and what is bad are never made clear by Townsend. His position could therefore be said to be untheorised. No theoretical (philosophical) model is put

15 "To the Toyland Frontier". p. 20. Further references will be in the text.

16 *Written for Children* (1983), p. 62 (emphasis added).

forward – instead what matters, as we have seen, is the "consensus of informed opinion over a period of time" (p. 101). "A good critic", Townsend suggests, "will be sensitive; he will have a sense of balance and rightness; he will respond" (p. 103). "Johnson, Arnold, Eliot [and] Leavis", he observes, "are reluctant to prescribe an abstract framework against which a work of literature can be measured. They see the danger" (p. 102). By way of support for his position, Townsend quotes Leavis' rejection of philosophical/theoretical discourse (in *Determinations* [1934]): "'out of agreement or disagreement with particular judgements of value a sense of relative value in the concrete will define itself, and, without this, no amount of talk about values in the abstract is worth anything'" (p. 101).<sup>17</sup> "The critic", Townsend concludes, "counts more than the criteria. He will have his standards, but they will have become part of himself; he will hardly be conscious of them. Certainly he will not cart them around with him like a set of tools ready for any job". Instead, the critic will "approach a book with an open mind and respond to it as freshly and honestly as he is able" (p. 103). Such an approach has what are now perceived to be obvious ethical/political implications in not making clear the standards by which texts are evaluated and placed in a certain order, as well as theoretical/philosophical implications in terms of assumptions about the nature of understanding and interpretation underpinning such notions as 'the open mind' and 'the fresh and honest response'.

Hunt's commentary leans more obviously towards a New Critical position than does Townsend's: "[m]y major divergence from Mr Townsend's views ... is on the stringency of definition and analysis required" (p. 130). Drawing on the New Criticism of "Brooks, Tate, Warren, and others" (p. 125), Hunt points to the importance of producing a "statement of fundamental definitions, principles, and standards" (p. 118) in order to "evaluate works of art on some sort of objective scale" (p. 119). He therefore places a greater emphasis on 'formal criteria' – "for our purposes the greatest stress can be laid on ... analysis by more or less objective tests" (p. 123). "We will apply several 'tests'", he concludes, "and if at least some of these produce positive results, then, objectively as may be, that book may be regarded as literature" (p. 124).

### **What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by book-centred critics?**

The purpose of this brief analysis of Townsend's and Hunt's book-centred criticism has again been to explore the first question outlined in my Introduction. The themes that have emerged from this analysis largely reinforce the conclusions of the previous chapter. Missing from Townsend's and Hunt's work, however, is the overt emphasis on ethical/political concerns that was present in Cameron's discourse on Garner and Dahl,

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<sup>17</sup> This issue recalls the well-known dispute between Leavis and René Wellek on the relevance of theory/philosophy to literary criticism, as I will discuss later.

and the strong preference for a so-called 'classic realist' aesthetic (perhaps the absence of such a preference is connected to the desire to avoid explicit engagement with ethical/political issues?). The issues these themes raise lead into my second question: what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse – what might be adults' investment here? To further develop my discussion on this important area, I will turn to the question that is the central concern of this chapter: what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform book-centred criticism and the broader theory and philosophy influential over this period. Having done so, I will then conclude the discussion on my second question.

### **What merits questioning in the assumptions that inform book-centred criticism?**

To explore the assumptions informing book-centred critical discourse, I want to focus on a number of contradictions evident in such discourse.

Townsend and Hunt have found it extremely difficult to adhere to the critical standards that they have advocated, thus effectively casting doubt on the validity of their critical approach.<sup>18</sup> So frequently are different critical standards applied in practice to those outlined in theory, that it becomes clear that rather than dismissing child readers from the critical process – "[w]hatever critical theory we produce for children's literature, it will have little or nothing to do with children" (Hunt, p. 119) – they are very much the focus of book-centred critics' concerns. Hence, while attempting to remove the confusion they see flourishing in child literature criticism – "the assessment of children's books takes place in an atmosphere of unparalleled intellectual confusion" (Townsend, p. 91) – such critics have unwittingly added to it. There are three main contradictions in Townsend's and Hunt's work on which I particularly want to focus: the apparent exclusion from 'literary criticism' of issues relating to ethics and politics, critics' overt dismissal of an appeal to child readers' responses to the text as irrelevant to 'literary criticism', and their proclaimed position that 'children's literature' is part of literature in general.

#### *Apparent dismissal of ethical/political critique as valid 'literary criticism'*

In theory, many book-centred critics have defined 'literary criticism' to explicitly exclude issues relating to ethics and politics. Townsend, as we have seen, has advocated the need for a standard of criticism that focuses on the "literary merit" of the text and excludes questions of "suitability" ("appropriateness to the supposed readership") and "relevance" (an "assessment of the [book's] message") (p. 96). His dismissal of ethical/political

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<sup>18</sup> Hunt recently admitted that the "'purist' approach [which he and Townsend both admitted to adopting] is one which is difficult to sustain", *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, p. 55.

critique as valid 'literary criticism' appears to be unequivocal: "it is perfectly possible to judge books for children by nonliterary standards. It is legitimate to consider the social or moral ... impact of a book ... But it is dangerous to do this and call it criticism".<sup>19</sup> "It is not irrelevant that a book may contribute to moral perception or social adjustment", he again states, "[but] in criticism there is no criterion except literary merit".<sup>20</sup>

In practice, however, these book-centred critics frequently assess child literature using ethical/political criteria. Townsend provides a good example of this contradictory stance. He suggests that an assessment of a book based on race issues is to take a dangerous step – "to assess books on their racial attitude rather than their literary value ... [is] still more dangerous"<sup>21</sup> – therefore apparently dismissing such assessments as valid 'literary criticism' but, as his practice later demonstrates, this theoretical ideal is not maintained. He dismisses Dahl's work, for example, based solely on the 'non-literary' assessment (by his own definition) that it is *racist*: "there is astonishing insensitivity about the creation, as late as the 1960s, of the comic little dark skinned Oompa-Loompas who man the factory".<sup>22</sup> A further problem arises from the contradictory way in which Townsend then engages in such ethical/political critique. Dahl's comic characterisation of the Oompa-Loompas is found to be *astonishingly insensitive* while Hugh Lofting's comic characterisation of black people in the *Dr Dolittle* series is found to be *harmless*: "*The Story of Doctor Dolittle* ... does undoubtedly contain offensive facetious references to blacks. Hugh Lofting obviously saw them as comic figures ... he meant no harm".<sup>23</sup> Dahl's work is regarded as without 'literary merit' and this appraisal is further reinforced by the racist aspect of his work (although this aspect is supposedly irrelevant to Townsend's 'literary critical' appraisal). Lofting's work, however, is regarded as having 'literary merit' and the racist aspect of his work, as identified by other critics, is this time described by Townsend as being *without malice* and seemingly irrelevant when taking into account the otherwise *excellent* qualities of Lofting's work: "Lofting has been accused of being 'a white racist and chauvinist'; and undoubtedly there are parts of the *Dolittle* books that are now found offensive". "It is sad", he continues, "that a writer with such excellent intentions should have got himself into such posthumous trouble. I hope

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19 "In Literary Terms", in *Crosscurrents of Criticism: Horn Book Essays 1968-1977*, ed. Heins (Boston: The Horn Book, 1977), p. 70.

20 "Didacticism in Modern Dress", p. 62.

21 "Didacticism in Modern Dress", p. 61. Similarly, Robert Bator classifies "ageism, sexism or racism" as "extraliterary" concerns, *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*, ed. Bator, p. xii. In an early challenge to such a view, Bob Dixon in his study of child literature, *Catching Them Young 1: Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction* and *Catching Them Young 2: Political Ideas in Children's Fiction*, states that his is "a literary study", *Catching Them Young 1* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. xv (emphasis added).

22 *Written for Children* (1983), p. 255.

23 "Are Children's Books Racist and Sexist?" in *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 2nd ed, eds. Egoff *et al.*, p. 387.

that in time Lofting will be forgiven, for assuredly there was no malice in this worried, sincere, well-meaning man".<sup>24</sup>

Townsend appears to be hiding behind a notion of 'literary merit' to avoid engaging with ethical/political questions. 'Literary merit' appears to absolve Lofting's book of its political/ethical difficulties, to make them irrelevant. However, Townsend has relied upon the ethical (and therefore by his own definition, 'non literary') criterion of "sincerity" to defend Lofting.<sup>25</sup> Clearly then, Townsend is unable to sustain the total lock out of ethical/political concerns from his commentary. He is in fact engaging in ethical/political critique (an *under-theorised* and *covert* critique) and engaging in such critique in a *contradictory* and *misleading* manner.<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that, based on approaches like Townsend's, ethical/political critique has in the past received such bad press. But as I have emphasised the solution to this is not to avoid such critique altogether (if this were at all possible anyway) but to do it better – to better engage with ethical/political issues (to broaden and reformulate the terms). Booth makes an important point in this regard with his observation that "we can no longer pretend that ethical criticism is passé. It is practiced everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, and often badly" (p. 19).

While child literature criticism has left behind the more transparent and overtly didactic intentions of earlier forms, these intentions, as Rose has also argued, appear to have merely gone underground.<sup>27</sup> That these ethical/political intentions are present, however, is not so much the problem (as it appears to be for Rose, as I will discuss in Chapter 6) rather it is the untheorised, contradictory and narrow way in which these intentions are presented.

Townsend's position on ethical/political critique is also problematised by his *apparent* dismissal of child readers' responses to the text as valid 'literary criticism' (I will come back to this apparent dismissal shortly). To engage in ethical/political critique about child

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24 *Written for Children* (1983), p. 167 and p. 169.

25 See also Leeson on this point (p. 22).

26 Consider also, by way of a further example, Townsend's comment that "we would wish every child to experience to his or her full capacity the enjoyment, and the broadening of horizons, which can be derived from literature". "I invite my hearers", he continues, "to subscribe to this modest and unprovocative creed. What it asks is the acceptance of literary experience as having value in itself for the general enrichment of life" (p. 93). Townsend gestures towards ethical/political concerns (emphasising the transforming power of 'literary experience' in terms of 'broadening horizons' and 'enriching life') but this is again problematised by his explicit denial, in an essay written in the same year (1971) as "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature", of such concerns as valid 'literary criticism': "[i]t is legitimate to consider the social or moral ... impact of a book ... But it is dangerous to do this and call it criticism", "In Literary Terms", p. 70. (This essay is an extract from Townsend's *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*, published in 1971.)

27 "Children's fiction", Rose observes, "seems to be circumscribed by a moralism which goes way beyond the more transparent didacticism and pedagogy of its earliest modes and into the heart of writing" (p. 139).

literature (to engage with ethical/political issues) while shutting out issues relating to the reception of the text by child readers is a difficult position to sustain. There is a strong (somewhat narrowly based) tradition of ethical/political criticism of child literature and of support for an overtly ethical/political child literature, both traditionally involving reference to the (actual/presumed) responses of child readers. While this is a considerable tradition to confront in child literature criticism, an alternative approach arises not perhaps from ignoring child readers' responses and suppressing ethical/political critique (as Townsend and Hunt seek to do) but from better engaging with those responses and with issues of ethics and politics.

The presence of an overtly didactic tone is viewed by critics, such as Townsend, as potentially damaging to child literature as a genre. The popular argument (in contradiction to Booth's argument that "all narratives are didactic") is that didacticism ended with *Alice in Wonderland* and that, from that date onwards, the purpose of child fiction has been solely to entertain: "[d]idacticism began to break down with the *Alice* books ... And today nearly all the old didactic books are dead; the survivors are those that rejected didacticism".<sup>28</sup> In practice, however, as I have discussed, such critics accept and indeed value the presence of didacticism in the text, and are arguably led, because of the contradictions within their own ethical/political critique, to place highest value on the text that (on the surface at least) appears to most successfully conceal its didactic concerns. (This again perhaps suggests an implied privileging of a so-called 'classic realist' aesthetic, for the book that best conceals these concerns.)

Even those critics "who work hard to purge themselves of all but the most abstract formal interests", Booth suggests, finally turn out to have "an ethical program in mind – a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good" (p. 5). He concludes that "no one seems to resist ethical criticism for long" (p. 6). And clearly, this is Townsend's predicament, something he does eventually admit. He concedes that, while as a "purist" critic he is "inclined to turn up [his] nose at the 'book with a message'", in practice the "revelation of the possibilities of human nature for good or ill is a major concern of literary art, probably *the* major concern of literary art". However, Townsend again immediately hedges this position: "[n]evertheless, it needs to be said from time to time that a book can be good ... without solving anybody's problems" (p. 104). While this statement implies that what Townsend is reacting against is the often simplistic resolution of moral and social problems that seemed to be becoming a dominant theme in child literature and some child literature criticism, he appears unable

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28 Townsend, "Didacticism in Modern Dress", p. 55. See also Haviland, "[t]he history of books written solely for children's reading pleasure, without didacticism, reaches back only a little more than a century", *Children's Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Haviland, p. 1.



to conceive of ethical/political critique of child literature as taking anything other than this narrow stance.

To lend support to his overt position that an ethical/political approach is apparently irrelevant to 'literary criticism', Townsend relies upon two key points. He maintains, firstly, that ethical/political criticism is based upon a non-tenable position – that is, on a demonstrated carryover from narrative experience to behaviour:

[t]he assumption, explicit or implicit, of those who are concerned about racism or sexism in children's books is that the books children read affect their attitudes. This assumption is not, so far as I know, based on the results of any organised research. I have not been able to trace any study which has produced substantial evidence of a formative effect.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, Townsend adopts the strong position that ethical consequence must be objectively proven and ignores less extreme (and more sophisticated and defensible) ethical positions.<sup>30</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, Booth agrees that the problem of proof represents one of the most difficult areas of ethical criticism. Until quite recently in our history, he points out, "people generally accepted without question a direct connection between stories read and probable effects on conduct" (p. 231) without any theoretical justification. Now, however, like Townsend, we demand proof – we have been "trained", Booth suggests, to never assess a text "by any effect it might have on readers" (p. 4). Critics therefore resist theoretical discussion of what they see to be 'non-literary' questions.

Secondly, Townsend appeals to child readers' responses to the book (the responses that he earlier declared to be irrelevant to his critical practice) to support his dismissal of ethical/political critique: "[authors of child literature] are no longer much confined by the bounds of what is 'suitable'; for it is, thank goodness, well accepted by now that children will pass unharmed over material they are not yet ready to understand".<sup>31</sup> Not only does Townsend now imply a carryover from narrative experience to behaviour (if the child was ready to understand such material, might they be harmed by it?) in contradiction to his position outlined above but he also engages in (generalisations about) the nature of child readers' responses. And yet, where are the results of any organised research producing substantial evidence of this non-influence (the same research that Townsend advocated other critics engaging in ethical/political critique needed to undertake)? He further suggests that there is some kind of natural progression from a state of 'child innocence'

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29 "Are Children's Books Racist and Sexist?", p. 384.

30 Although obviously not available to Townsend see, for example, Booth's position on the issue of ethical consequence outlined in *The Company We Keep*, as discussed in Chapter 1 (although noting that I had some questions concerning that position).

31 "The Present State of English Children's Literature", *Only Connect*, 1st ed, ed. Egoff *et al.*, p. 414.

(all children, because they are children, will not understand certain things in the text) through to a state of 'adult experience' (a highly questionable notion). Further, as I also mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to Merrick's commentary on Dahl, Townsend appears to imply that harmful material in child fiction does not *matter* because child readers pass over it. Again, 'the child' is being constructed here as innocent of the difficulties (language, violence, sexuality) and divisions (race, class, gender) of which, as Rose points out, "children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10). Townsend's appeal to child readers' responses to the text brings me to the next contradiction in book-centred criticism.

*Apparent dismissal of child readers' responses to the text as valid 'literary criticism'*

While in theory book-centred critics dismiss any appeal to child readers' responses to the text as falling outside 'literary criticism', this position is clearly not maintained in practice. Having earlier argued that a "standard of literary merit" should form the "backbone" of criticism and dismissing as a "haphazard mixture of personal responses" the conjectures of child-centred critics about "what children like or what is good for them" (p. 99), Townsend himself later conjectures about child readers' likes and needs: "[t]here is something about *The Secret Garden* that has a powerful effect on children's imaginations: something to do with their instinctive feeling for things that grow, something to do with their longing for real, important, adult-level achievement".<sup>32</sup> As Leeson suggests, Townsend "generously equips himself with 'an awareness' of the audience" without any evidence of having actually surveyed child readers. In "its flight from the 'morass of subjective responses'", such criticism ends up "at a position of extreme subjectivity" (p. 22)<sup>33</sup> (again demonstrating how extreme oppositional stances inevitably fall apart). Townsend's appeal to child readers' responses therefore appears to have little to do with the responses of actual child readers (which have been dismissed as irrelevant) but arguably relate more to a 'child reader's' response that he himself has created and to

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32 *Written for Children*, 1st rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1974), p. 89. Nor is this an isolated example of the contradictions in his criticism in this regard. See, for example, Townsend on Arthur Ransome's *Swallow and Amazons* stories, "[w]ith the Lake District books, especially, I suspect that the main appeal to children must be that of identification", and on Kathleen Hale's *Orlando* series, "[t]heir packed, vivid pictures have an air of lively extravaganza that seems to appeal to children", *Written for Children* (1974), p. 185 and p. 202. I owe these examples to Hunt, "Childist Criticism: The Sub-Culture of the Child, the Book and the Critic", *Signal*, 43 (1984), p. 55.

33 Of interest, is that in the Foreword to the first edition of *Written for Children* (London: Garnet Miller, 1965), Townsend states, "[m]y principal advisers in the project have been my eldest children, aged 12 and 9. They have told me with the greatest frankness which books they liked and disliked". However, this remark is immediately qualified by the following statement, "[b]ut the views expressed here are mine not theirs. I look upon acceptance to the child as a preliminary hurdle rather than a final test" (p. 9). As later editions of *Written for Children* confirm this appeal to child readers' responses is a critical position with which Townsend is clearly uncomfortable, for by the book's 2nd revised edition (1983), the reference to his children's responses (or any child reader's response) is dropped altogether.

which he can reliably appeal in order to lend authority to his reading of the text – the response of a 'child reader' with known needs and wants. Such a view is supported by Meek:

[w]hen adult critics read books that they call children's literature, they make implicit, as well as explicit, judgements about children which are always accepted, never examined. The reader is assumed to be an idealised child ... The ideal reader of what we want to call children's literature, may have to be acknowledged, for research purposes, as a necessary fiction.<sup>34</sup>

*'Children's literature' is part of literature in general*

In contradiction to their fundamental proposition that 'children's literature' should be considered as part of literature in general,<sup>35</sup> critics' comments all finally serve to point to the *separateness* of 'children's literature' from adult literature. As we have seen, Townsend has stated that "there is no such thing as children's literature, there is just literature" (p. 95) and advocated that 'children's books' therefore be assessed by the same critical standards as adult books – in this case, by a standard of 'literary merit' that excludes (in theory at least) reference to child readers' responses to the book and to books that are popular with children alone. The same essay, however, closes with a series of statements that effectively contradict everything that went before:

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- 34 "Prolegomena for a Study of Children's Literature", *Approaches to Research in Children's Literature*, ed. Benton, pp. 30-31. This is also the argument behind Lesnik-Oberstein's recent study, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*. However, as I will discuss in later chapters, I have difficulties with the way that she seeks to impose this concept on *all* child literature critics – such an approach is overly reductive of the complexities of contemporary critical theory on child literature.
- 35 To support this position, critics point firstly to the widely acknowledged difficulty of fixing upon a satisfactory definition of 'children's literature'. Townsend suggests, for example, that any "line-drawing" between such literature and adult literature is somewhat "arbitrary": "absurd as it might seem, the only workable definition of a children's book [is] 'a book that appears on the children's list of a publisher'". If publishers place a book "on the children's list, it will be reviewed as a children's book and will be read by children" but if they place it "on the adult list, it will not – or at least not immediately" (p. 95). In this way, Townsend perhaps achieves his objective, for as Peter Hollindale asks, "what [then] is the point of distinguishing 'children's' literature from any other kind of literature?", "Children's Books or Children's Literature", *Use of English*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1981), p. 38. Critics have argued secondly that the concept of authorial intention is critically invalid – one cannot rely on the evidence of authorial intention to establish the audience for the book, to establish a book as 'children's literature'. Conversely, however, to follow this logic, one cannot then rely on the evidence of authorial intention to *dis-establish* the audience for the book. And yet, many critics have pointed to the stated intention of several acclaimed authors of child fiction that they 'wrote for themselves' and not for children as a further reason to distrust the classification of a book as 'children's literature'. Townsend, for example, observes that more than half of the nineteen leading authors of 'children's literature' he surveyed, revealed that they wrote for themselves and not for children, *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children* (New York: Lippincott, 1971), p. 36. (See, for instance, Garner, "I don't write for children, but entirely for myself", "A Bit More Practice", p. 196.) Chambers challenges this notion of 'I write for myself': writing is "always a matter of using certain rhetorical techniques" and there is "no escaping the fact that the techniques used reveal, on close study, the reader to whom the writer speaks", "Three Fallacies about Children's Books", p. 58. I will explore this issue further in Part Two of this thesis, when I discuss reader-response theories.

I feel the critic must write for himself with an awareness that the books he discusses are children's books (p. 103) ... I did not ... mean to imply that ... whether [the book] actually speaks to the child does not matter ... if a children's book is not popular with children here and now, its lack of appeal may tell us something. (p. 104)<sup>36</sup>

Leeson also suggests that Townsend has undermined his critical position on this point: "Townsend makes a complex and interesting case for the non-existence of a specific 'children's literature'" but it is "a point of view as widely held in theory as it is ignored in practice" (p. 18).<sup>37</sup> Like Townsend, the editors of *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature* have also stated that the aim of their collection of critical writings has been "to find selections that deal with children's literature as an essential part of the whole realm of literary activity, to be discussed in the same terms and judged by the same standards that would apply to any other branch of writing" – the criticism of child books does not call "for the adoption of a special scale of values".<sup>38</sup> However, Egoff (one of the book's editors) again later contradicts this position by making a plea for the preservation of the "'childlike' qualities" that "pervade the finest [children's] books": "warmth, wonder, gaiety, sentiment, and simplicity".<sup>39</sup>

While Townsend and other book-centred critics have sought to assess child literature by the same critical standards as were at that time applied to adult literature and to collapse the differences between the two genres, this theoretical position has therefore not been maintained in practice. In this regard, Philip's approach is more consistent in that, in adopting a similar book-centred approach to literature as Townsend, he at least follows this approach through to its logical conclusion in his critical practice. Philip's ultimate concern is therefore with 'adults' literature' rather than 'children's literature':

"[e]verything Alan Garner has published has been published for children ... I will not, except in this preface, be much concerned with [this fact]. This book is about Alan Garner the writer, not Alan Garner the children's writer".<sup>40</sup> Philip does not here imply that Garner's 'children's literature' is not for children at all but rather chooses to study it

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36 Contrast these statements, in turn, with Townsend's Foreword to *Written for Children* (written two years later) and there are more contradictions: "I am less apologetic about the omission of popular but insignificant material ... for better or worse, this is a study of children's literature, not of children's reading matter. It seeks to discriminate", 1973 Foreword reprinted in *Written for Children* (1983), p. 14.

37 Similarly, Meek observes that "[f]or years we have said ... that children's literature must be examined by the standards that apply to adult literature, without really asking ourselves ... what that really meant, or even producing very good examples of criticism that would enlighten us as to why our concern was 'children's literature' rather than literature in general", "Prolegomena for a Study of Children's Literature", p. 30.

38 *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 1st ed, eds. Egoff et al., p. xv.

39 "Precepts, Pleasures and Portents: Changing Emphases in Children's Literature", *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 2nd ed, eds. Egoff et al., p. 433.

40 *A Fine Anger*, p. 7.

as a part of 'adults' literature'.<sup>41</sup> This approach in itself is not a problem (although Philip falls into other difficulties in adopting this stance – see my discussion of his work in Appendix C) but it does call into question the appropriateness of the term 'children's literature'.

Like Townsend and Rose, I therefore also have some difficulties with the term 'children's literature' but my concept of 'child literature' does not seek, like Townsend's concept of 'children's literature', to exclude what is impossible to exclude (issues concerning child readership) or, like Rose's avoidance of the term altogether, to arguably shut down important areas of discussion.

### **Book-centred critics' investment in the notion of the 'critical adult'**

Book-centred critics have therefore found it extremely difficult to adhere in practice to the critical framework they have constructed for themselves in theory. As Hunt correctly points out of the book-centred position (writing in 1991 following a marked shift in his earlier views), although it is "generally agreed" that there is no need to change "the coinage of criticism" (between adult and child literature), the fact that "these agreed-upon ideals are not maintained in practice suggests that there is a sub-text to much writing of and about children's books".<sup>42</sup> To return then to the second question raised in my Introduction, clearly book-centred critics do have an interest (an investment) in 'the child', an interest that has frequently been concealed and denied. While contemporary critical discourse on child literature accepts that adults have an investment in the concept of 'the child' and openly discusses this issue, most book-centred critics are not so explicit. Townsend denies having any interest in child readers and instead (in theory at least) addresses himself to the 'critical adult'. This reinforces my argument, as outlined in the previous chapter, that book-centred critics have sought to hide behind the concept of the 'critical adult' – or, in the words of Townsend, the "informed" adult (p. 101) and Hunt, the "discriminating" adult (p. 127) – in order to conceal their investment in the concept of 'the child' and suppress difficult theoretical and philosophical questions raised by (child) readers' varying responses to the text.

### **Developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced book-centred criticism**

This brings me to a discussion of the developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced book-centred criticism on child literature: to the

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<sup>41</sup> A number of critics have chosen to treat works of 'children's literature' as adult literature, with the term 'children's literature' becoming simply a label, no meaning is attached to the '*children's*' component of the term.

<sup>42</sup> *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*, p. 20.

work of Leavis and to the critical approaches grouped under the heading of the New Criticism, including the less easily classified work of Richards. In the limited scope of this thesis, I want to briefly outline some affinities between book-centred criticism and these critical approaches, and then focus in greater detail on three areas where it is generally conceded there are difficulties with the approaches of Leavis, Richards and the New Critics: their positions on ethics and politics, assumptions about language and meaning, and treatment of the concept of the reader (with the treatment of the reader in Leavis' and Richards' critical approaches having implications for the treatment of the child reader in book- and child-centred criticism).

In this way, I want to place my discussion on book-centred criticism in a broader context and seek to work towards a more comprehensive and critical understanding/appreciation of book-centred criticism, as well as of the criticism of Leavis, Richards and the New Critics.

While there is not scope to discuss the work of Leavis and particularly the New Critics at length,<sup>43</sup> I would emphasise that I am conscious of the dangers of over-simplifying these positions<sup>44</sup> and setting-up such criticism as 'easy targets' for some types of 'poststructuralist' critique. I should state right upfront that this is not going to be another case of "Leavisophobia" (to employ David Parker's term).<sup>45</sup> I am not discussing Leavis' work for the purposes of dismissing it. Rather, I believe that there is much to be gained from a re-reading of Leavis' work, and particularly from a re-reading in the context of

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43 For comprehensive studies of Leavis, see Michael Bell, *F. R. Leavis* (London: Routledge, 1988) and Anne Samson, *F. R. Leavis* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). Other significant studies on Leavis include Gary Day, *Re-Reading Leavis: Culture and Literary Criticism* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996), Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London: New Left Books, 1979) and Wright, "F. R. Leavis, the *Scrutiny* Movement and the Crisis", *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, eds. Jon Clark et al. (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1979), pp. 37-65. A recent reappraisal of the New Criticism is provided in *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*, eds. William J. Spurlin and Michael Fischer (New York: Garland, 1995). For other significant studies of the New Criticism, see also Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) and *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970); John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight, Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956). For a detailed study on I. A. Richards see John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989) and Pamela McCallum, *Literature and Method: Towards a Critique of I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983). On the New Critics and Richards, see also Freund's "Richards Revisited" and "New Criticism and the Avoidance of Reading", *The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 23-39 and pp. 40-65, respectively.

44 I am also aware of the danger of collapsing the differences between the New Critics, as well as the differences between Leavis' approach and that of the New Critics (they are not the same although they share aspects in common).

45 "Leavisophobia and the Return to Ethics in Literary Studies", *Quadrant* (June 1996), pp. 61-66.

understanding the influence of that work on developments in child literature criticism. As I will further discuss in my conclusion to this chapter, I therefore want to open up discursive space on Leavis' work rather than shut it down.

Clearly, both Leavis and the New Critics have in the past been subject to reductive and unfair critique.<sup>46</sup> That said, recent critics from various critical persuasions have generally conceded that there are problems with aspects of Leavis' criticism and the New Criticism. Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, for example (who are more sympathetic to Leavis' approach and label themselves "humanist" critics<sup>47</sup>), have difficulties with aspects of Leavis' ethical critique: "[t]hough Leavis purports not to have any theories of literature or morality it is now obvious that he at least has implicit quasi-theories" and these "quasi-theories purport to be objectively true accounts of literature and the moral life, and to be such as to enable access to the objective truths embodied in particular literary works" (p. 43). And, when "it comes to giving evidence for a theory, Leavis is", they argue, "at once evasive and unhelpful" (p. 44). Freadman and Miller also have difficulties with the political assumptions underpinning Leavis' emphasis on literature and literary criticism as guarantors of culture: "such a project", they observe, "addresses itself to particular cultural ends and it locates criticism within a particular historical schema" (p. 43). Similarly, in a sympathetic re-reading of the New Criticism, William Spurlin acknowledges problems with such criticism in that it often ignored or did not account fully for "any historical, personal, ideological, or social contextualisation of the text either in its production or in its reception". It "overlooked determinants of positionality" (such as gender, race, social class, history and so on) that shape literature as well as criticism.<sup>48</sup>

*Broad affinities between book-centred criticism and the critical approaches of Leavis and the New Critics*

To anyone familiar with the approaches of Leavis and the New Critics, there are clearly broad affinities between such approaches and book-centred criticism on child literature, as

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46 Samson suggests that Eagleton's discussion of Leavis, for example, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* is a rather "tendentious and belittling account of his work", *F. R. Leavis*, p. 190. Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller make the important point that "the contempt in which a figure like Leavis is now often held reflects a climate in which acts of well-intentioned intellectual over-correction, or biases associated with certain forms of ideological commitments and contestation, have obscured valid and valuable aspects of traditional precept and practice", *Re-Thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 39. See also Parker on this point, "Leavisophobia and the Return to Ethics in Literary Studies", pp. 61-66. Similarly, Spurlin argues that the New Criticism has often been "treated as a scapegoat", in particular in the over-simplification of New Critical concerns for textual autonomy, "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory", *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Spurlin and Fischer, p. xviii.

47 *Re-Thinking Theory*, p. 7. Further references will be in the text.

48 "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory", p. xviii.

a number of critics have pointed out<sup>49</sup> (although, unlike Townsend and Hunt, Leavis places greater overt emphasis on ethical criticism).

As we saw with the book-centred critics, Leavis is concerned with the standards by which literature is to be assessed, standards that will raise the status of literature as well as that of its accompanying critical commentary. Again, these standards are underpinned by values that are perceived to be unproblematic and agreed upon by all – or at least by a particular group of readers/critics that matter:

[u]pon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the *implicit standards* that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there.<sup>50</sup>

A problem here, as I will discuss, is that Leavis does not make a coherent argument for the intellectual authority of his value-judgements. He resists theorising/philosophising about his position (see my discussion below on the exchange between Leavis and René Wellek) and holds onto narrow, overly reductive concepts of 'literature' and a 'cultivated minority' of readers/critics, concepts he also regards as unproblematic.

Like the book-centred critics (particularly Cameron), Leavis also views literature as playing a central role in preserving certain aesthetic, ethical and political values that are perceived to be under threat in modern society.<sup>51</sup> Related to this, he also believes strongly in literature as a way of enriching life: "the university not merely as a place of learning, research and instruction, but as itself a nucleus (one of a number) of the greater public, the spiritual community the country needs as its mind and conscience".<sup>52</sup>

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49 While I am not aware of any study that has explored these affinities in detail, see Meek, "What Counts as Evidence in Theories of Children's Literature?", *Theory into Practice*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1982), p. 285. Rose has also drawn links between 'traditional' (book-centred) criticism on child literature and Leavis' critical approach. See also Lesnik-Oberstein's, "On Not Knowing the Child: Children's Literature Criticism and Adult Literary Theory", *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, pp. 131-164. While Lesnik-Oberstein's study sounds highly relevant to my discussion here, it makes only brief comments on the work and influence of Leavis, Richards and the New Critics, and is based on different terms. As I will discuss in later chapters, I have difficulties with aspects of her study. I find, for example, her oppositional classifications of "educationalist" versus "pluralist" to define differences between both past and contemporary child literature critics unhelpful and reductive.

50 Leavis, "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture", in *For Continuity* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1933), p. 15; quoted in Samson, *F. R. Leavis*, p. 41 (emphasis added).

51 Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), by which Leavis was influenced, is another important source of such views.

52 Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University: The Clark Lectures, 1967* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 30.



A strong concern about the state of society and its educational institutions logically leads out to a strong concern with the individuals who can play a culturally influential role here (the critics/teachers of literature and language), with those who are to be influenced (children and young adults) and with the medium of influence, (literature and language). It is not therefore surprising that Leavis, in being so strongly concerned about the state of society and the transforming power of a literary education, should also be concerned about the child, child literature, and the values attached to child-rearing. While this might all sound a bit 'far-fetched' – that Leavis should have an *overt* interest in the child and in child literature and its criticism – I would point the reader to Peter Coveney's major study on the 'image of childhood' in (adult) literature that has a lengthy introduction by Leavis.<sup>53</sup> "In the child", Leavis states in this introduction, "life asserts its spontaneity, without which there is nothing" (p. 17). 'Spontaneity' is a favoured term of Leavis', frequently used in reference to his vision of a pre-industrial 'organic' culture, a culture that embodied the aesthetic, ethical and political values that he perceived to be under threat in modern society. 'The child' offers perhaps the final refuge for such a vision.

It is also not surprising, given the strong influence it is generally agreed Leavis has had on developments in literary criticism and on the way literature has been taught (at university and at secondary and primary school levels<sup>54</sup>), that his influence on child literature criticism<sup>55</sup> and conceptions of the child should be so strong. Parker, for example, points to the influence of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (compiled by a former pupil of Leavis', Boris Ford<sup>56</sup>) which drew "heavily on Leavisian ideas and on the *Scrutiny* circle of critics", commenting that this "immensely successful" publication extended the range of Leavis' influence "to the point where, in much of Britain and the

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53 "Introduction by F. R. Leavis", in Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society – A Study of the Theme in English Literature*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 15-27. Further references will be in the text. Coveney studies childhood "as it has been presented in literature written for adults in ... the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 11).

54 As Wright observes, the influence of Leavis and his group "both on literary criticism (and hence, indirectly, on literature itself) and on educational and cultural thought generally, has been extensive and persistent". This influence can be traced in the literary criticism of major critics such as Raymond Williams and "in a subtler, more pervasive form in the very structures and presuppositions of English teaching in schools and colleges throughout Britain and the Commonwealth", "F. R. Leavis, the *Scrutiny* Movement and the Crisis", p. 37. It is important, however, not to overstate this influence as have critics such as Eagleton (see "The Rise of English" in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*).

55 It is interesting, for example, that Inglis in the opening sentence of his study, *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Literature*, should draw directly from the opening sentence of Leavis' *The Great Tradition*: "[t]he great children's novelists are Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Arthur Ransome, William Mayne, and Philippa Pearce – to stop for a moment at that comparatively safe point on an uncertain list" (p. 3). To compare Leavis' words, he states, "[t]he great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad – to stop for a moment at that comparatively safe point in history", *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 9.

56 I find it interesting that Ford also edited an early study in child literature, children's writing and child literature criticism: *Young Writers, Young Readers: An Anthology of Children's Reading and Writing* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

Commonwealth in the late fifties and sixties, the *Scrutiny* perspective on the canon of English literature ... was more or less the orthodox one".<sup>57</sup>

A detailed study of this area, as far as my research suggests, remains to be done, and is beyond the scope of this thesis. While a number of child literature critics have recently discussed the important relationship between education policies and conceptions of child literature and the child over this period (see Rose<sup>58</sup> and Lesnik-Oberstein,<sup>59</sup> for example), they do not specifically trace the institutional influences of Leavisite criticism and the broader *Scrutiny* movement on the education of children in language and literature, on conceptions of 'the child', and on child literature and its criticism.

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Leavis' vision of an 'organic' culture, and the literary judgements that purport to flow from it, are not politically disinterested. They are again evidence of a desire to preserve certain political, as well as ethical and aesthetic, values. Many critics have had difficulties with this aspect of Leavis' work (as Leeson had difficulties with this same aspect of Townsend's work) in that it is not articulate about its political values and tends to claim "that the best literary criticism together with the literature it helps to canonise, is above and beyond politics" (Parker, p. 62). Leavis' notion of a lost 'organic community', to support his diagnosis of a decaying society, has come in for particular attention here:

[a] culture expressing itself in a tradition of literature and art – such a tradition as represents the finer consciousness of the race and provides the currency of finer living – can be in a healthy state only if this tradition is in living relation with a real culture, shared by the people at large ... This culture the progress of the nineteenth century destroyed, in country and in town; it destroyed ... the organic community.<sup>60</sup>

Anne Samson makes the important point that what emerges in this extract from Leavis' work "is the implication that a 'culture expressing itself in a tradition of literature and art' will represent 'the finer consciousness of the race' ... *whether or not* [such a tradition] is

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57 "Leavisophobia and the Return to Ethics in Literary Studies", p. 64. Further references will be in the text.

58 Rose highlights the importance of education policy on assumptions about literacy, language and child literature (see "*Peter Pan*, Language and the State", pp. 115-136), observing that the "failure to discuss the importance of educational policy on language for children's writing is ... [a] conspicuous evasion" (p. 8). In particular, she examines the way in which *Peter Pan* was amended for the two different school systems existing at the time – the public and elementary schools – and how these amendments serve to expose divisions of class, culture and literacy between readers.

59 Lesnik-Oberstein states that "it is ideas found in writings on education which are a large component, and a powerful expression, of the creation of a category of 'childhood', and thus of 'children's books'. Education is the area above all within which explicit elements of the conventions of the adult discourse on childhood developed", *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, p. 39.

60 *For Continuity*, pp. 164-165; quoted in Samson, *F. R. Leavis*, p. 56.

in touch 'with a real culture, shared by the people at large'".<sup>61</sup> She argues that the suggested continuity of culture in the 'organic community' is therefore eroded as it is being asserted, and a political order is being privileged that ensures the old hierarchies between social groups are maintained.

Leavis' critical position, like Cameron's, is as I have suggested overtly ethical. He defends the ethical significance of literature. In defining the 'great tradition' of the English novel, for example, he states that the works that form this tradition "are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity".<sup>62</sup> However, Leavis resists philosophising/theorising about his critical position. This aspect of Leavis' work has been discussed by many critics, particularly his well-known exchange with Wellek on this issue.<sup>63</sup> Samson concludes, and I would agree, that what Leavis regards as an appeal to philosophy in Wellek's critique (a mode of discourse considered by Leavis to be outside literary criticism), is no more than an appeal by Wellek for "rational argument" (p. 107). Despite this apparent anti-philosophical/theoretical bias, recent critics have traced philosophical influences (unconscious and unacknowledged) in Leavis' work and highlighted a theoretical underpinning to his criticism.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike Leavis, Townsend's critical position is not overtly ethical. Instead, as in some contemporary criticism, these concerns are submerged (denied). In this way, Townsend's critical position more closely resembles that of the New Critics. While the New Critics (taking Cleanth Brooks as representative here<sup>65</sup>) engage in little explicit talk about ethics<sup>66</sup>, "moral and religious assumptions were implicit", Monroe K. Spears argues, in

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<sup>61</sup> F. R. Leavis, p. 57 (emphasis added). Further references will be in the text.

<sup>62</sup> Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> In responding to Leavis' *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936), Wellek requested that Leavis be more explicit about the conceptual premises underpinning his work: "the only question I would ask you is to defend this position more abstractly and to become conscious that large ethical, philosophical, and, of course, ultimately, also aesthetic choices are involved", Wellek, "Letter", in *The Importance of Scrutiny, Selections from Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review, 1932-1948*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 23. Leavis' response was to emphasise that, "[t]he reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy ... Philosophy, we say, is 'abstract' ... and poetry 'concrete'. Words in poetry invite us not to 'think about' and judge, but to 'feel into' or 'become'", Leavis, "A Reply", in *The Importance of Scrutiny*, ed. Bentley, p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Bell on the closeness of Leavis' conception of language to the phenomenological tradition, particularly the work of Heidegger, F. R. Leavis, pp. 35-54. See also Freadman and Miller, "[i]t is clear that, inevitably, [Leavis] does have a general theory of literature and that this general theory does powerfully influence his readings of particular texts" (p. 41).

<sup>65</sup> Graff treats Brooks "as representative of the New Critical view" on the grounds that "Brooks frequently acknowledges the closeness of his views to those held by Tate, Wimsatt, Blackmur, and Robert Penn Warren", *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma*, footnote 1, p. 87. Graff's claim is not of course unproblematic (see Krieger's comment at my footnote 91).

<sup>66</sup> Booth, for example, speaks of "the New Critical emphasis on formal excellence, with little explicit talk about ethical quality" (footnote 13, p. 220). This is not, of course, to say that the New Critics were not concerned with ethics/politics.

Brook's work: "questions that seemed to be aesthetic or rhetorical turned out to be at bottom moral".<sup>67</sup> This (in admittedly reductive form) illustrates an interesting parallel between the New Criticism and Townsend's book-centred criticism.

As this brief discussion has demonstrated, there are clear affinities between the work of Leavis and the New Critics and that of the book-centred critics but these affinities raise a number of concerns about these critics' assumptions about ethics and politics, language and meaning, and the reader, areas to which I will now turn in further detail.

*What merits questioning in the assumptions about ethics and politics that inform the critical approaches of Leavis and the New Critics?*

In his literary criticism, Leavis seeks to shore up certain ethical and political, as well as aesthetic,<sup>68</sup> values, values that are (should be) agreed upon by all readers, or at least the particular group of readers that count, and are therefore perceived to be unproblematic. This is to take up a narrow/reductive stance on ethics and politics, a stance further compromised by its untheorised nature and the fact that it is not politically disinterested (it does not engage with its conceptual premises or its political investments).

Freadman and Miller, for example, have difficulties with Leavis' emphasis on ethical truths that are perceived to be objective and unproblematic: "[his] quasi-theories purport to be objectively true accounts of literature and the moral life, and to be such as to enable access to the objective truths embodied in particular literary works" (p. 43). They also point to the untheorised nature of his criticism as a problem: "when his polemic requires – as it inevitably must – some appeal to evidence, he eschews rational argumentation in favour of impressionistic rhetorical appeals to intuition, 'moral seriousness' ... and to an idiosyncratic vision of English culture, present and past" (p. 44). Similarly, Josephine Guy and Ian Small observe that Leavis, while emphasising the particular values he believes to be important, omits to make "a coherent argument for the intellectual authority of value-judgements in themselves".<sup>69</sup> Leavis' position is rather that "if you don't see that literature matters for what really gives it importance" (the values it embodies should be

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67 "Cleanth Brooks and the Responsibilities of Criticism", in *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), ed. Lewis P. Simpson, p. 239.

68 Of interest here is Leavis' emphasis on the 'concreteness of language', an important value in his work. Perhaps this echoes the preference in book-centred criticism for a so-called 'classic realist' aesthetic? Samson suggests, for example, that there is a tendency in Leavis' work "to make concreteness a precondition of moral significance" (p. 155), which perhaps also gestures towards the link made by Rose between a 'classic realist' aesthetic and didactic purpose?

69 *Politics and Value in English Studies: A Discipline in Crisis?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 75.

self-evident) "then no account you can offer ... can be anything but muddle and self-delusion".<sup>70</sup>

While Freadman and Miller, and Guy and Small, are critical of Leavis' narrow and theorised ethical stance, this is not because they want to put forward the argument that ethical critique is inherently flawed, and that ethical concerns should be excluded from critical discourse (albeit that it is not possible to exclude such concerns). Rather, these critics want to acknowledge and actively promote the validity of such critique, and call for it to be done *better*. Rather than rejecting such criticism altogether because of its past narrow focus and untheorised stance, such critics have sought to better engage with ethical issues (to broaden and re-formulate the terms).<sup>71</sup>

Inherent in their comments on Leavis is a call for a revised (more even-handed/positive) perception of value-judgements, ethical/political critique and evaluative discourse, and their role in literary theory. The notion that such discourse is "somehow intellectually (and politically) outmoded" is so "widespread" within literary studies, Freadman and Miller argue, "that it requires detailed refutation" (p. 52). While the claims of some past ethical criticism are regarded as narrow, simplistic and untheorised, this does not mean that such criticism is obsolete,<sup>72</sup> value-judgements need instead to be acknowledged as problematic (where Leavis viewed them as unproblematic) and as inevitable. In this context, while favoured Leavis terms (such as 'maturity') do need to be treated with care (they are not without problems), the supposition that such terms have *no value at all* is equally not without problems. The major problem with Leavis' work then for such critics is not that he enters into ethical critique per se (a critique that in Leavis' work happens to be narrowly based) but that he does not philosophise/theorise about his critique.

Leavis assumes that the values he privileges are not only straightforward but also that there is consensus (at least amongst a 'cultivated minority' of readers) about these values. This appeal to a particular group of readers (an issue I will discuss in more detail shortly) has political implications, although this reference to 'political implications' requires some clarification.

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70 Leavis, "The Responsible Critic, or The Function of Criticism at any Time", in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, Volume II, ed. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 299.

71 There are a number of recent studies that have successfully done so (see my footnote 38 in the previous chapter).

72 As Taylor comments, "we all as human agents define ourselves against a background of distinctions of worth ... it surely could not be that naturalists [evaluative sceptics] are somehow exceptions to this rule, just because they do not *recognize* that they are constituted by strongly evaluative self-interpretations", *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4.

The lack of explicitness about ethical concerns in some contemporary theory has been noted by a number of critics.<sup>73</sup> Such critics have been particularly concerned with some contemporary theories that, while they are implicitly ethical, are overtly ambivalent or hostile towards ethics, and have called for a more open debate about the central questions in moral philosophy. These contemporary theories, critics argue, have taken a reductive view of ethics, that the ethical is always 'bad politics'.<sup>74</sup> Marxist theories come in for particular critique here (as do some poststructuralist theories):

[t]he Marxist tradition had recognised that 'human values' are to a large extent cultural products rather than manifestations of an intrinsic human 'nature'. And since the governing assumptions about what is 'natural' or 'human' in a culture tend to favour the dominant interests in the given society, the Marxist critique looks with suspicion on any appeal to intrinsic values.<sup>75</sup>

To the Marxist critics, ethics therefore becomes a political screen for the dominant class, race or gender, something for evaluative critics to hide behind. Leavis' criticism is accordingly criticised for its (unconscious) political commitments.<sup>76</sup> Critics have also argued that some contemporary theories have privileged a political critique that is itself not open to criticism. Again, Marxist theories come under question here for assuming that, because they are politically informed, they somehow have a privileged vantage-point and are not subject to the diagnostic critique they exercise on opposing standpoints. From this perspective, Marxist criticism is therefore as problematic as Leavis' criticism.<sup>77</sup>

In acknowledging that many traditional value judgements, such as Leavis', are not politically neutral, that formations such as ethics are historically- and culturally-contingent (and hence recognising the merit of political critique), it is not surprising then that a number of critics have sought to point out that there is a corresponding problem with the

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73 See, for example, Parker, "post-structuralist theory has been largely unconscious of its ethical bearings, in much the same way as the older humanist criticism was often unaware of its allegiances to the interests of a particular race, social class and gender", *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*, p. 4.

74 Frequently, contemporary theories have taken the view that the ethical is always 'ideological'. There are problems, however, with this term. As Freadman and Miller observe, "whilst few would deny that politically expedient forms of false consciousness are present and to some extent engineered in all societies", there are "numerous (and often conflicting) accounts of ideology within Marxist theory". On the one hand, there are Marxist critics who "see ideology as massively and at all levels determinative of consciousness" (a problem here being that such accounts have "somehow to account for the capacity to conceive of alternative states of affairs"). And, on the other hand, there are "[w]eak notions of ideology" that seem to "entail nothing more than some generalised and unsystematic notion of social conditioning" (p. 75). I will have more to say in later chapters about the problems with this term and have generally avoided using it in this thesis.

75 Bell, *F. R. Leavis*, p. 21. Further references will be in the text.

76 See Day on Marxism and Leavis, *Re-Reading Leavis*, pp. 107-121.

77 This point has been strongly made by Bell, *F. R. Leavis*, p. 22. See also Freadman and Miller in their comparison of Leavis' work and Eagleton's post-structuralist Marxist theory, "Two Paradigms of Literary Theory" (pp. 34-50), as well as their chapter on "Althusserian Marxism: Text Production Theory" (pp. 72-114). Many other critics, that I have not cited here, have also discussed this issue.

silence on ethical issues in some contemporary theories – that such theories are not ethically neutral. While contemporary ethical critique needs to become more attune to its *political* commitments, contemporary political critique needs to become attune to its *ethical* commitments. It has been argued that in rejecting ethical critique – because of its 'traditional' narrow perspective, untheorised position and unconscious political stance – many later critics have sought to remove ethical critique entirely from their discourse, and leant more heavily towards political critique.

I will stop at this point because this reference to contemporary theories takes me into the concerns of Part Two and the claims made here are not as yet supported in this thesis by analysis of those theories. This trend towards a submerging of ethical critique is however supported by my analysis of Townsend's book-centred discourse. Such a trend also perhaps partly explains why Leavisite criticism has been held in such contempt.<sup>78</sup> It further explains why ethical critique, as it manifests itself in Townsend's critical discourse, became less explicit (as critics equivocated over the validity of such a position) and ultimately highly confused in its assumptions. This discussion, while it moves into issues of contemporary theory, is important because it reinforces my point that Townsend's position is not ethically neutral and provides a more charitable re-reading of Leavis' approach.

I want to now 'stick back together' the ethical and the political, seeing the division made by some critics between ethics and politics as a problem in itself. These concerns about Leavis' and the book-centred critics' treatment of ethics/politics also raises questions about their assumptions about language and meaning, particularly regarding their accounts of 'literature' as enabling access to certain objective truths – that all readers (or at least a privileged group of readers) will (should) grasp the same truth and receive the same meaning from 'literature'. Such a viewpoint suggests a perception of language and meaning as stable and unproblematic. However, it is important not to critique such a viewpoint from a reductively oppositional position that in itself merits questioning for its own stance on the nature of language and meaning. (My discussion on this complex area in regard to Leavis' work is over-brief and limited by the scope of this thesis. I will, however, keep returning to the concepts of language and meaning throughout this thesis.)

*What merits questioning in the assumptions about language and meaning that inform the critical approaches of Leavis and the New Critics?*

Leavis' conception of (literary) language might perhaps be stated (although in an admittedly reductive way) as follows: that language is 'unstable' but that a 'speech community' with 'shared values' realises language in such a way that language enables

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<sup>78</sup> See my footnote 46 in this chapter, particularly the comments by Freadman and Miller.

access to a ('relatively stable') reality/meaning/truth (there are many scare quotes here, suggesting that all of these terms should be used with caution). Leavis observes, for example, that:

words 'mean' because individual human beings have meant the meanings ... Individual human beings *can* meet in a meaning because language – or let us rather say *a* language, meaning the English language ... – is for them in any present a living actuality that is organically one with the 'human world' they, in growing up into it, have naturally taken for granted.<sup>79</sup>

Such a statement suggests why some poststructuralist critics might have had difficulties with Leavis' work. For such critics, word concepts achieve their meaning not by being 'organically one' with/corresponding to things in the world, and the individual subject is as much a creation of language conventions as the meanings such conventions enable the subject to create. As Bell suggests, "Leavis' concern for language as the collective creation of its speech community has become steadily more *passé*" (p. 133). However, in an effort to open up some discursive space that moves away from a 'Leavis *versus* poststructuralist' perspective on language and meaning, I would point out that there are some interesting aspects of Leavis' use of language that have been silenced and neglected by many critics.

Bell highlights for particular attention Leavis' use of the term 'enactment': "[t]he register of language in use implied by the term 'enactment' remains elusive of generalised or analytic definition partly because it is not contingent upon a literalistic imitation" (p. 43). In drawing links between Leavis and the position of Heidegger (I will discuss Heidegger's work in Chapter 4, although not specifically the aspect of his work that Bell comments on here), Bell states that both "attribute crucial expressive value to aspects of language which, for a more instrumental view, are merely illusory" (p. 43). Some contemporary critics have been silent on this aspect of Leavis' position, perhaps, Bell observes, because of "the hegemony of the Saussurean tradition in modern thinking about language" (twentieth-century thought "in a range of intellectual fields", Bell suggests, is characterised by "a recognition of language as radically governing the ordering and understanding of experience"). Instead, he suggests, if we explore the space in between this viewpoint and its opposite, we might see that Leavis' "emphasis on the creative processes of language does not disprove the Saussurean, and post-Saussurean, analyses so much as make them beside the point. The qualities that matter are not those that such methods can usefully discuss" (p. 27). While Samson suggests that Leavis wavers between an objectivist and subjectivist stance, between "different, incompatible concepts of language"<sup>80</sup>, Bell seeks to retrieve Leavis from this somewhat reductionist reading and

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<sup>79</sup> *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 58.

<sup>80</sup> Samson argues that for Leavis, on the one hand, language is the "means by which the reality of existence is *expressed* ... meaning in an important sense pre-exists language" (p. 173) and on the



in doing so therefore raises more interesting issues about Leavis' stance. Bell observes, for example, that for Leavis, "[t]he significant 'truths' of great art are won as on a high wire over an abyss" (p. 50).<sup>81</sup>

There are interpretive benefits to be gained from not placing Leavis *always and only* in an oppositional stance against poststructuralism. Whether or not we agree or disagree with Bell's specific observations, I think his general *approach* is an important and useful one. I have therefore canvassed his observations in some detail because, as I will shortly discuss, they echo important concerns raised by other critics, such as Bernstein and Taylor, about being drawn into limited, uncritical 'either-or-ist' stances that obscure the interesting insights of the various positions on language and meaning that lie in between these extremes.

While problems remain with Leavis' conceptions of language – both recent critics who have (sympathetically) re-read his concept of language and poststructuralist critics who are more sceptical of his approach agree that Leavis' conception of language is untheorised, often confused, and not ethically/politically neutral – there is now *debate*, rather than outright dismissal, concerning the kinds of questions his approach raises about conceptions of language.<sup>82</sup>

*What merits questioning in the assumptions about 'the reader' that inform the critical approaches of Leavis and the New Critics?*

A further problem with Leavis' work raised by a number of critics is his insistence on the authority/validity of one response. Where Leavis' conception of language and a speech community at first appears to allow multiple (although not infinitely plural) responses, he shuts this down to one response through an emphasis not just on 'shared standards' but on a 'shared standard'. As Samson suggests, language, for Leavis,

has to embody shared standards, has to be agreement in a form of life ... [but] his authoritarian temperament leads him to interpret very rigidly what such agreement and such a sharing of values might mean. In rejecting any kind of relativism he has to take his ... stance, not as a *position*, but as representing the actuality of life. (p. 107)

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other hand, because Leavis needs to "make individual judgements compelling, to give them an authority in the world at large", language becomes not the means by which reality is expressed "but the very condition of its creation" (p. 174).

81 Bell suggests that the "two complementary impulses that between them span modern consciousness of language: on the one hand a radical awareness of its delusive and distorting nature and on the other hand a belief in its truth-telling and expressive capacity", are "the poles between which the creative use of language, in Leavis' understanding, must occur" (p. 50). For Leavis, "the critic's sensitivity to language must encompass both dimensions" (p. 52).

82 Day's *Re-Reading Leavis* and Bell's *F. R. Leavis* are good examples of this.

Freadman and Miller make a similar point, that for Leavis "the great texts" are at once "repositories of truth and respecters of the sacred multiplicity of experience" (p. 40) but that "plurality does not in Leavis' view preclude the possibility of definitive textual interpretations: his work is renowned for its ferocious insistence upon the rightness of his own readings" (p. 41). Leavis assumes that the values he privileges are not only unproblematic (requiring no theoretical defence) but also that there is consensus (at least amongst a 'cultivated minority' of readers) concerning the truth of these values. This appeal to a particular group of readers has political implications. Frances Mulhern comments on this group of adult readers/critics:

[t]he values implicit in 'literary criticism' were drawn from [Leavis'] 'sense' of a community that he and his collaborators could neither identify in the real nor define in thought – except as part of a circle of meanings whose interdependence was exclusive and absolute. The perimeter of the circle marked the limits of persuasion: what *Scrutiny's* audience did not 'know already', it could not be told.<sup>83</sup>

Leavis' 'cultivated minority' of readers/critics recalls Townsend's 'informed adult', Hunt's 'discriminating adult', Booth's 'qualified observers' and Cameron's 'critical adult'. These terms in themselves are not unproblematic if their conceptual premises are defined, and dialogue encouraged (critics are free to agree or disagree). However, the book-centred critics and Leavis seek to establish a 'community' of adult critics/readers for books that will ensure that certain books gain literary status. In doing so, not only do they not encourage dialogue, but they perceive 'literature' as embodying certain straightforward values/truths. This position is eventually undermined because, as I have also mentioned in regard to the book-centred critics, they cannot finally shut out variety in response (whether from child-centred critics, child readers or other adult critics/readers) by simply ignoring it and, in doing so, refusing to engage with their conceptual premises.

Leavis therefore resembles Cameron, Hunt and Townsend in their appeal to the notion of one ideal reader, the 'qualified observer' – not in Booth's sense as a process of coduction which accepts that a *range of views* exists among qualified observers and emphasises the process whereby the qualified reader/critic engages in dialogue with other qualified readers/critics to make his/her point, by which demonstration other qualified readers/critics are led to agree or disagree<sup>84</sup> – but in the sense that qualified observers (or 'critical adults') will (should) hold *one view*.

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<sup>83</sup> *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, p. 175.

<sup>84</sup> There is, as I have discussed, nothing perhaps absolute in Booth's appeal to 'qualified observers' and to multiple, rather than to infinitely plural, responses because the reader is free to agree or disagree with Booth's stance. He suggests that "we face not an infinity of doctrinal disputes, only a multiplicity. In practice at any one time, in any one critical community, dealing with any one work, we will quarrel on only a fairly limited number of points ... If defenders of any ... group want to raise a new objection, I can happily enter the debate, knowing that I will not in fact need to face hundreds of such debates" (p. 421). See my discussion on Booth's approach in Chapter 1.

Leavis does therefore have a tendency to shut down plural response. A number of critics, such as Samson, have linked this tendency to the potential contradiction in the aims of Richards' so-called 'practical criticism' by which Leavis was influenced (through a similar emphasis on close textual analysis). Richards had a dual purpose: to teach discrimination (which implies training in a set of rules) and to encourage readers to chart their personal response to poetry. The first activity implies, as Samson suggests, "standards by means of which we are able to judge – hence the tendency for the practice of criticism to move towards a kind of drill and its language to become technical". The second activity, however, "seems to imply that we need to shake off conventional trammels in order to discover what we really feel" (p. 19). In this way, Richards and Leavis combine a belief in the creative role of the reader with the idea that there is one right reading: "[a]nalysis ... is the process by which we seek to attain a complete reading of a poem – a reading that approaches as nearly as possible to the perfect reading ... What we call analysis is ... a constructive or creative process".<sup>85</sup>

This brings me to a brief discussion of the treatment of the reader in the New Criticism and to say more about the work of Richards (Richards is commonly regarded as the founder of the New Criticism). Richards' theory appears to place a dual emphasis on the reader and the text. As I have suggested, on the one hand, he emphasises the experience of the reader – "[t]he reader must be required to wear no blinkers, to overlook nothing which is relevant, to shut off no part of himself from participation" – and, on the other hand, he emphasises that a poem must be preserved "from contamination, from the irruptions of personal particularities. We must keep the poem undisturbed by these or we fail to read it".<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in *Practical Criticism*, he comments that:

[t]he personal situation of the reader inevitably (and within limits rightly) affects his reading ... Thus memories, whether of emotional crises or of scenes visited or incidents observed, are not to be hastily excluded as mere personal intrusions. That they are personal is nothing against them – all experience is personal – the only conditions are that they must be genuine and relevant, and must respect the liberty and autonomy of the poem.<sup>87</sup>

Richards seeks to negotiate a difficult balance here between the text as an autonomous self-contained whole guiding readers' responses towards the 'correct' meaning and the freedom of readers to interpret the text as they please but he finally implies, as the above extract from his work suggests, that the reader's task is to arrive at the correct reading of the text as guided by textual directives. As Elizabeth Freund observes, having "deregulated the norms governing aesthetic response by electing the authority of a

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85 Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an English School* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 70.

86 *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 80 and p 78.

87 *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 239-240.

constituting subject", Richards installs qualifying conditions "intended to revoke the excesses of subjectivity" and reinstates textual "prerogatives for the determination of meaning".<sup>88</sup> However, Richards is finally unable to shut out the reader, that is, the varying responses of readers to the text and hence the varying meanings made of the text. This tension between the reader and text inevitably resurfaces in the New Critics' selective incorporation of Richards' approach. The New Critics sought to objectify the text (taking their lead from one part of Richards' approach) but the other part of Richards' approach (the reader) refused to be finally excluded.

The conventional charge against the New Criticism is that it focuses on the text in isolation of its readers, that it is concerned with 'the words on the page' and the text as an autonomous self-contained whole rather than with the reader and varying perceptions of value. The 'anti-affective' stance<sup>89</sup> of the New Critics therefore represents a shift away from Richards. (This is, however, a reductive reading of the New Criticism<sup>90</sup> and it also assumes there is a homogeneous body called 'the New Criticism'.<sup>91</sup>) Nevertheless, the New Criticism, like book-centred criticism on child literature, is unable to sustain this lock-out of the reader. Wimsatt and Beardsley state, for example, that:

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88 *The Return of the Reader*, p. 43. (Further references will be in the text.) I will return to this issue in Chapter 4 when I discuss reader-response theories and the work of Iser.

89 In defining the 'affective fallacy', W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley attempted to differentiate between the text and its effects on readers, "The Affective Fallacy", *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1954), ed. Wimsatt, pp. 21-39.

90 Spurlin argues, for example, that the New Critical concerns for the affective fallacy, 'close reading' and textual autonomy have been over-simplified. He suggests that these "neither necessarily nor logically obscure any close relation between text and reader", "New Critical and Reader-Oriented Theories of Reading", *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Spurlin and Fischer, p. 230. (I agree with Spurlin on this point as I will discuss.) The New Criticism, he continues, postulates that "literary meaning is constituted in the interaction between the text and the reader in a very similar manner that has been further developed by work on reader *reception*" (pp. 232-233). Regardless of whether highlighting reader or text, however, Spurlin concedes that the New Criticism (like reader-response theory) is finally undermined by this problematic opposition, whether by an unresolved tension from privileging one term over another or by inconclusiveness, a confused wandering viewpoint between reader and text. This is demonstrated by Brooks' position. Like Spurlin, Cleanth Brooks also sets out to rebut the "persistent misunderstanding" about the New Criticism that "to emphasize the work seems to involve severing it from those who actually read it", "My Credo – Formalist Critics", in *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Spurlin and Fischer, p. 46. "The formalist critic [the New Critic] knows as well as anyone", he argues, "that literary works are merely potential until they are read" (p. 47). However, Brooks goes on to state: "[b]ut the formalist critic is concerned primarily with the work itself ... There is no reason, of course, why [the critic] should not turn away into biography and psychology. Such explorations are very much worth making. But they should not be confused with an account of the work" (p. 47). Ultimately then, Brooks' comments reveal the same process of affirmation and denial as book-centred criticism concerning the reader.

91 As Krieger observes, the New Critics are "commonly referred to as if they constituted a single and defined entity. This is an especially convenient device for those who want to issue a blanket condemnation of them", *The New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 4.

[t]he more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for emotion, the poem itself, and the more reliable it will be as an account of what the poem is likely to induce in other – sufficiently informed – readers. It will in fact supply the kind of information which will enable readers to respond to the poem.<sup>92</sup>

Freund rightly points out how this paragraph "contrives ambivalently to include and exclude the reader in one movement, entangling subject and object ... so irreducibly as to convey a double and contradictory message, one half of which must be suppressed in the interests of coherence" (p. 3). Wimsatt concedes the need for a reader-response criticism while at the same time pointing to the irrelevancy of such criticism because of the reader's identification with an emotion already inscribed in and guided by the poem itself. As Brooks admits, the New Critic "assumes an ideal reader: that is, instead of focusing on the varying spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from which he can focus upon the structure of the poem".<sup>93</sup> In a defence of this position, while he concedes that "there is no ideal reader", Brooks argues that, "for the purpose of focusing upon the poem rather than upon [the critic's] own reactions, it is a defensible strategy" for the "alternatives are desperate": either relativism ("one person's reading is as good as another's") or the appeal to a "consensus" of a group of "qualified readers" (although this is "simply to split the ideal reader into a group of ideal readers") (p. 48). There cannot be many views (or an infinite number of views or a consensus of views) but only one view: that of Brook's ideal reader. As Spurlin suggests, the New Critics, in practice, are therefore interested in the reader. In this way, the New Criticism resembles book-centred criticism on child literature.

There are clearly implications here for reader-response theories, as I will discuss further in Part Two of this thesis, and for child-centred criticism on child literature. For if an unresolved tension or inconclusiveness in the work of the New Critics resulted from their emphasis on the text and (attempted but finally unsuccessful) efforts to exclude the reader, then a similar outcome might be predicted in reader-response/child-centred criticism privileging the other side of the opposition, that is, from their emphasis on the reader and (attempted but finally unsuccessful) efforts to exclude the text. And indeed, this is what my discussion on child-centred discourse in Chapter 1 revealed – that child-centred criticism sought to focus on the (child) reader but ultimately revealed a confused wandering viewpoint between the (child) reader's response and the objective 'literary' status of the text. It is of interest in this regard, and again not perhaps surprising given

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92 *The Verbal Icon*, p. 34.

93 Brooks, "My Credo – The Formalist Critics", in *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Spurlin and Fischer, p. 48. Further references will be in the text.

this interchanging focus on reader and text, that Richards has also been claimed as the founder of reader-response theory.<sup>94</sup>

This brings me to a brief discussion of child-centred criticism. I will defer comment here on the developments in the broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced child-centred criticism because, as the remarks above suggest, this rapidly leads me into a discussion of more contemporary developments in reader-response criticism both more generally and on child literature (something I will discuss in Part Two). I will also for this reason defer discussion of what merits questioning in the assumptions about language and meaning, ethics and politics and (particularly) the reader in Richards'/other reader-response theories. Brooks has hinted at some of the difficulties with such theories – the focus on 'the reader in general' [the 'ideal reader'] and the attempt to deal with the multiplicity of readers' responses – issues that, while they are touched upon below, will be discussed in more detail in Part Two.

### **Issues in child-centred criticism: what merits questioning in the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that inform child-centred criticism?**

I do not propose to go into child-centred criticism in depth. It encompasses a much smaller body of writing than book-centred criticism (reflecting its position outside of the 'mainstream') and is largely untheorised. Developments in contemporary literary theory, such as reader-response theory, have brought to such criticism the clearly enunciated theoretical framework it lacked. I will therefore discuss reader-response theory in detail in Part Two.

Child-centred criticism is characterised by an approach that asserts that "the adult's response and the child's [to the book] cannot be the same",<sup>95</sup> and that child readers' responses should therefore be a critical consideration. *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading* (1977) edited by Meek *et al.* provides a representative statement of the child-centred critical position. *The Cool Web* maintains that book-centred critics have left a number of "essential questions unexamined", such as what children actually get out of reading, how we form judgements when readers cannot be explicit about their own responses, and how we can be certain about what is a good book without reference to the reader (pp. 3-4). "It would be difficult", the editors continue, "to justify another collection of essays such as this, unless it opened up a way forward from the minority cult which children's literature can so easily become if the authors and the critics ... lose

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94 See Jane P. Tompkins, "[r]eader-response criticism could be said to have started with I. A. Richards' discussions of emotional response", "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Tompkins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. x.

95 *The Cool Web*, eds. Meek *et al.*, p. 4. Further references will be in the text.

sight of the readers" (p. 4). Unlike the book-centred critics, *The Cool Web* also emphasises and explores the differences between child fiction and adult fiction: "[i]t cannot be simply the same to write for an audience that includes children and one that does not" (p. 144).

The "chief concern" of *The Cool Web* is to focus on readers and to ask about the nature of their reading experiences, for "although it is possible to judge books for children by what are called 'adult standards' and regard them as part of literature, the young reader carries a different world in his head ... his experience of reading must be different" (p. 11). Implicit here is a call for a re-definition of 'literature' and 'literary standards' taking into account children's experiences of the text: "how a 'good' [that is, a 'literary'] book for children is judged becomes less obvious and has to be redefined" (p. 5). (As one of the editors of *The Cool Web*, Meek, later comments, the "texts we choose gain the status of literature because we are responsible for defining what counts as evidence of their worth. But it is what counts as evidence that needs re-evaluation".<sup>96</sup>) However, as discussed in Chapter 1, this position is constantly hedged by child-centred critics. Like book-centred criticism, child-centred rhetoric also betrays its own self-division.

Moss, for example, who has two essays reprinted in *The Cool Web*, "The 'Peppermint' Lesson" (pp. 140-142) and "The Adult-eration of Children's Books" (pp. 333-337), seeks to draw a barrier between the objective 'literary' status of the text and child readers' responses. Child readers' responses have no impact on the definition of what is 'literary': "[t]he assumption that only the literary book was worth consideration, the neglect of the needs of the ... non-literary child sowed the seeds of the polarity – pure criticism versus child-oriented comment".<sup>97</sup> As this suggests, child-centred critics do not engage with (purist) book-centred 'literary criticism'. They reject it as much as they are rejected by it, therefore leaving the 'literary standards' upheld by book-centred critics largely intact. Similarly, Hunt points to the example of a major British award-giving committee that questioned whether 'literary' standards were relevant in selecting a 'good' children's book.<sup>98</sup> 'Children's literature', as it was then conceived by book-centred critics, therefore appears to be something of a contradiction for the child-centred critics. The best child books (in theory at least) were instead those that child readers regarded as good. As Hunt observes,

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<sup>96</sup> "What Counts as Evidence in Theories of Children's Literature?", *Theory into Practice*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1982), p. 285. She further argues that "[i]n our concern to speed children's progress to what we believe is their literary heritage, and in our making of theories of children's books, we gradually dismiss as insignificant everything that is not 'literature' transmitted by adults" (p. 287). See also Leeson, "[r]ather than purge criticism of 'non-literary' elements, let us renew and enrich literary standards with those elements" (p. 24).

<sup>97</sup> Moss, *Part of the Pattern*, p. 138. Further references will be in the text.

<sup>98</sup> *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*, p. 20.

[t]he 'book centred' writers feel that, logically, there is no such thing as a *children's book*. You cannot define a child; you cannot rely on authorial evidence either for establishing the intended audience ... books are well written, or badly written, that is all ... The 'child-centred' group, however, might argue that there is no such thing as *children's literature*, unless you use the term in a way unrelated to common usage. It is a contradiction in terms.<sup>99</sup>

In this context, Moss also rejects the tag of 'literary critic': "I have begged to be considered a commentator rather than a critic", she states, "because I am happy, very happy to leave literary criticism to those who work in universities" (p. 207). In hindsight, however, having read an essay by an acclaimed 'literary critic' (Philip) that recognised the need for child books to be seen "not only in relationship to the literature of their day but also to the idea that all children need to be catered for", she admits that she might have been a 'literary critic' all along: "[r]eading his piece, I began to wonder whether, all unawares ... I hadn't, after all, been a children's book critic – of this new strain, but working away in the decade before it became respectable" (p. 216). In this way, Moss advocates a critical approach to child fiction that will somehow strike a balance between 'literary' standards of excellence and accessibility to the largest number of children.

### **Child-centred critics' investment in the notion of the 'non-literary child reader'**

In trying to strike this balance between 'literary standards' and accessibility to child readers, child-centred critics not only call into question the assumptions that then underpinned the concept of 'literary merit' but also the assumptions that underpin their own construction of child readers' responses. What becomes very unclear in child-centred discourse then is just who is responsible for the privileging of certain texts over others – child-centred critics working with child readers or child-centred critics alone? – and what criteria are being used (is it the experiences of child readers or the experience of some idea/generalised 'child reader' that counts)? In this way (reinforcing my claim in Chapter 1), I would argue that child-centred critics have similarly obscured their involvement in the evaluation of texts, as well as their interest in child readers, by hiding behind the concept of the 'non-literary' child reader (the term used earlier by Moss). Like reader-response criticism, and its antithesis, the New Criticism, child-centred criticism reveals a confused wandering viewpoint between (child) readers' responses and the objective 'literary' status of the text. Even while seeming to place new emphasis on the reader, such criticism reasserts the autonomy of the ('literary') text.

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99 Hunt, "Children's Books, Children's Literature, Criticism and Research", pp. 18–19.



**What merits questioning in the assumptions that inform book- and child-centred criticism, and past developments in literary criticism: closing down issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers?**

To conclude this chapter then in terms of my third question, I would argue that book- and child-centred critics, and Leavis, the New Critics and Richards have tended to *close down* issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers.

Leavis and the book-centred child literature critic, Townsend, have tended to close down issues about ethics and politics. Both these critics' approaches merit questioning in this regard: Leavis for his untheorised, narrow ethical stance and unconscious political stance and Townsend for similar reasons but also, in reacting against the narrowness of 'traditional' ethical critique, for seeking (unsuccessfully) to suppress ethical critique. (Hence while Leavis' approach, like Cameron's, is *overtly* ethical, Townsend's approach is surreptitiously ethical.) In a similar way too, the New Critics also appear to have shut down issues of ethics/politics. Even recent critics who have undertaken a sympathetic re-reading of the New Criticism, agree that it took for granted, addressed fragmentarily or ignored "historical, personal, ideological, or social contextualization[s] of the text either in its production or in its reception".<sup>100</sup>

And yet, it needs to be acknowledged that, in practising ethical criticism (in engaging in an area of criticism that has fallen out of favour), Leavis and book-centred critics such as Cameron and Rees have kept open an important area of critical dialogue.<sup>101</sup> Further, these critics have frequently been strongly criticised for their perceived objectivist positions on language and meaning from the perspective of some poststructuralist stances that also merit questioning for their 'relativist' positions on language and meaning, and for their uncritical and finally unrealisable suppression of the ethical.

For all this, however, more recent critics who have sought to broaden and reformulate ethical/political critique, and explore positions on language and meaning in between these oppositional stances, have been rightly critical of Leavis' position (and I would extend this to the critiques of the book-centred critics). But again, while these critics agree that there are problems with Leavis' conception of language and meaning, there is now often *debate* rather than outright dismissal concerning the kinds of questions his approach raises about conceptions of language and meaning (the same applies to the book-centred critics).

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<sup>100</sup> Spurlin, "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory", p. xviii.

<sup>101</sup> As Parker states, "[n]o major critic of this century has been more unambiguously identified with the defence of the ethical significance of literature than Leavis" (p. 62).

In focusing so much attention on the text, the role of the reader is undertheorised in the work of the New Critics, as it is in Leavis' criticism. I agree with Spurlin, however, that it is "simplistic to assume that the degree of attention necessarily given to the text in the reader/text relationship leads to a repression of the reader" and, similarly that "questioning the validity of so-called objectivist approaches automatically, logically, or naturally leads to subjective relativism, or an 'anything goes' approach, which are often criticisms and suspicions levelled against theories of literature that give attention to the reader".<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, the New Critics and their antithesis, the child-centred critics (as well as the reader-response critics to be discussed in Part Two), retain the problematic oppositions of text versus reader/reader versus text which leads to contradictions that ultimately undermine their approach. In child-centred criticism particularly, this leads to questions concerning how 'the (child) reader' is being constituted by such critics.

While the developments in criticism that I have discussed in this chapter have tended to close down issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers, this is not therefore to argue that such criticism has closed down *all* issues concerning these areas or to imply that recent developments in critical theory have automatically *opened up* these issues. Leavis' criticism, the New Criticism, and book- and child-centred criticism have in fact kept open for discussion several areas (such as ethics) that some later critics have sought to close down.

**What might be the adult critics' investment in the images of the (child) reader and characteristics of (child) literature and its critical discourse that have been privileged by book- and child-centred criticism and past developments in literary criticism?**

To conclude this discussion on my second question, I refer back to the motivations suggested by Rose that I canvassed in Chapter 1. Rose identifies a desire to use (child) literature and critical discourse on that literature and an image of the generalised/idealised (child) reader to hold off a threat to the assumption that "language is something which can simply be organised and cohered" (p. 10), shore up certain values (aesthetic, ethical, political) that are perceived to be under threat in modern society, escape from the "historical divisions" (class, gender, race) and "difficulties" (language, sexuality) of our society (p. 10), and suspend questions about how our identities are implicated in language and sexual differences. These issues open up multiple questions about ethics and politics, and about 'the reader' and readers/'the child' and children, in the context of broader questions about language and meaning. I now want to develop these points further.

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102 "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory", p. 234.

It is my contention that the problems and contradictions identified in Leavis' criticism, the New Criticism and Richards' (reader-centred/text-centred) approach resemble those that I have identified in book- and child-centred criticism, and that the motivations identified by Rose – that child literature critics place an investment in certain images of the child reader and certain characteristics of child literature and its criticism – are not unlike those revealed in the critical approaches of Leavis, the New Critics and Richards (the investment that Leavis, for example, has in certain images of the adult reader/critic and certain characteristics of literature and its criticism). The point here, however, is that the influence of the New Criticism and Leavis' literary criticism has arguably endured for much longer in child literature criticism than in broader critical discourse.<sup>103</sup> Book-centred criticism was flourishing in the 1970s when Townsend and Hunt wrote their key theoretical papers and Rose was still reporting the dominance of this position when she wrote *The Case of Peter Pan* in 1984. This suggests that what are generally agreed to be the biggest problems with Leavis' criticism, the New Criticism and Richards' approach may have been lobbed onto child literature and 'the child' as a last refuge.

#### **A 'partial' account of book- and child-centred criticism**

In engaging in ethical/political critique it is important to give due regard to the ethical *and* political, and not to assume a privileged vantage point on the ethical/political (of ethical/political neutrality, for example). Similarly, a critique that questions the assumptions about language and meaning informing the work of other critics (such as the book- and child-centred critics, Leavis and the New Critics) needs to theorise and engage with its own assumptions about language and meaning.

Against this background, I earlier mentioned concerns raised by critics, such as Bernstein, about being drawn into an 'either-or' position. Taylor's observation in this regard is worth quoting in full to underline Bernstein's point:

[a] critique of what can be called 'subjectivism' is, indeed, one of the central themes of [these critics'] line of thought. They saw that the disengaged identity and the designative account of meaning it gravitates toward centres everything on the subject, and exalts a quite unreal model of self-clarity and control ... The speaking agent is in fact enmeshed in two kinds of larger order, which he can never fully oversee, and can only punctually and marginally refashion. For he is only a speaking agent at all as part of a language community ... and the meanings and illocutionary forces activated in any speech act are only what they are against the background of a whole language and way of life. In light of this, certain models of transparent consciousness and clairvoyant control are shown to be not only unrealizable but destructive. But this point is more parodied than articulated by playful rhetoric about the end of subjectivity, or about texts with nothing outside to relate to. If any general position emerges from all this, it points to a view of the

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<sup>103</sup> This is not to discount the continued influence of elements of the New Criticism and Leavis' criticism on contemporary mainstream criticism. Bell observes, for example, that "some version of [Leavis'] stance effectively underlies, in suffused and implicit ways, much of the everyday reading, and study, of literature; even where this is denied" (p. 2).

code as ultimate, dominating the supposedly autonomous agent ... A position like this can only make itself remotely plausible by claiming that the only alternative to it is some such wildly extreme subjectivism. And so it has a vested interest in muddying the waters, and obscuring *all the interesting insights which must necessarily lie in the space between these two absurd theses*.<sup>104</sup>

While extreme objectivist and subjectivist oppositions have been soundly challenged, it is only comparatively recently that extreme relativist positions (in the specific guise of some forms of 'postmodernist' critique) have come in for sharp critique. As Bell not uncontroversially points out, such discourse from a Leavisian point of view appears "profoundly unrepresentative because it arises from having got 'language in the head' in something like the sense that Lawrence diagnosed 'sex in the head'" (p. 134). Taylor's and Bell's comments here are important because, along with Bernstein's, they point to the benefits of considering the insights of various critical positions without being drawn into an 'either-or' stance (pushing all the critics to which one is opposed into extreme 'straw target' positions and/or oneself assuming a position at the opposite extreme), particularly an extreme relativist stance from which position critics such as Leavis, the New Critics and the book-centred critics are viewed as having nothing to offer, nothing to say – or rather, nothing to which some critics want to listen.

This discussion has immediate relevance for my analysis of the book- and child-centred critical discourse on Garner and Dahl in Chapter 1, as well as for my support for aspects of Rose's position. The purpose of this thesis is, as I have emphasised, to gradually build up towards a detailed critique of Rose's work and the range of approaches to child literature based on a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the key concepts of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. In this way, I will seek to develop my discussion on these key concepts as I progress through this thesis. A downside of this approach is that my critique of the book- and child-centred critics in Chapter 1 might now appear somewhat limited (the reference to 'classic realist' texts, for all my caveats, being a good example). This is a deliberate ploy in that, while Chapter 1 served to illustrate some of the more obvious problems with book-centred and child-centred criticism – hence my sub-title for the chapter, "A 'Partial' Account of Book- and Child-Centred Critical Discourse"<sup>105</sup> – Chapter 2 has sought to go back over these problematic approaches (along with the approaches of Leavis, the New Critics and Richards) and to re-read them towards a more comprehensive, critical and, to use Taylor's term, perhaps more "interesting" discussion of their insights. Part One, taken as a whole, therefore prepares the ground for my critique in Part Two of contemporary developments in child critical theory and in broader criticism, theory and philosophy.

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<sup>104</sup> *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, pp. 10-11 (emphasis added).

<sup>105</sup> 'Partial' in the sense of being both incomplete (needing Chapter 2 to broaden the terms of the discussion) and somewhat uncritical (reliant in part on Rose's term 'classic realism').

While book- and child-centred critics have undoubtedly closed down some important issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers through an often narrow, untheorised and contradictory approach, some of the issues they have opened up are exactly those that, as I will discuss in Part Two, have been closed down by contemporary critics.

## **Part Two**

### **Contemporary Developments in Critical Theory**

## Chapter 3

### Critical Approaches to Alan Garner and Roald Dahl (1977–1997): A 'Partial' Account of Contemporary Critical Discourse

#### *Hiding behind the 'Liberated Child Reader'*

For the purpose of this study, the major critics on Dahl's work writing over the period 1977–1997 can be broadly divided into two groups. One group, represented by Hunt,<sup>1</sup> Chambers,<sup>2</sup> Jan Chesterfield-Evans<sup>3</sup> and Zohar Shavit,<sup>4</sup> has generally found Dahl's work to be insufficiently challenging to child readers in its use of language, lacking in 'genuine' appeal to children, and/or repressive in its ethical/political values:

Dahl's writing [is] the 'acceptable face' of childhood, a mildly anarchic rebellion allowed by the ruling adult culture ... Dahl, by defining the acceptably unacceptable, is simply part of the regulatory system ... The supposed contract with the child ... distracts attention from what might be seen as the books' covert, anti-child (and perhaps anti-human) purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Another group of critics, represented by Charles Sarland,<sup>6</sup> West,<sup>7</sup> Dieter Petzold,<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Culley<sup>9</sup> and Barbara Wall,<sup>10</sup> has favourably assessed Dahl's work, finding it to be challenging to child readers in its use of language, of 'genuine' appeal to children, and/or liberating in its ethical/political values:

in subject matter and content the book [Dahl's *The Twits*] is plainly part of the culture of childhood. And not only that, it explores themes and interests that many adults would rather not know about. In that sense it is part of an oppositional culture ... [I]t is the challenge to the cultural order that children find absorbing.<sup>11</sup>

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- 1 See *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, pp. 190-191 and "Childist Criticism: The Subculture of the Child, the Book and the Critic", pp. 44-45.
  - 2 See "The Reader in the Book", pp. 254-256.
  - 3 See "Roald Dahl: A Discussion and Comparison of his Stories for Children and Adults", *Orana*, no. 19 (1983), pp. 165-168.
  - 4 See "A Test Case: Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*", *Poetics of Children's Literature*, pp. 43-59.
  - 5 Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, pp. 190-191.
  - 6 See "*The Secret Seven* vs *The Twits*: Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?", pp. 155-171.
  - 7 See "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children", pp. 115-116 and "Regression and Fragmentation of the Self in *James and the Giant Peach*", pp. 219-225.
  - 8 See "Wish-fulfilment and Subversion: Roald Dahl's Dickensian Fantasy *Matilda*", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1992), pp. 185-193.
  - 9 See "Roald Dahl: 'It's About Children and It's For Children' – But is it Suitable?" *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1991), pp. 59-73.
  - 10 See *The Narrator's Voice*, pp. 17-18 and pp. 193-194.
  - 11 Sarland, "Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?" p. 162 and p. 171.

The major critics on Garner's work writing over the same period can also be broadly divided into two groups.<sup>12</sup> One group, represented by Chambers,<sup>13</sup> maintains Garner's best work for children to be that which is challenging to child readers in its use of language:

[Garner's] *The Stone Book* best exemplifies the features I began by outlining. Its consciousness of language, the layered density of the narrative ... the fact that it is not the straightforward, sequentially controlled and naturalistic story it pretends to be: all these things make it a touchstone by which to redefine the limits and possibilities of literature for the young.<sup>14</sup>

Another group of critics, represented by Wall,<sup>15</sup> maintains that Garner's work (particularly what is often regarded as his best work) is not addressed *to* child readers and, in doing so, takes a view of Garner's *The Stone Book* the opposite of Chambers':

[i]t is the author's passion for words rather than a commitment to children which emerges from *The Stone Book*. Garner's implied reader is always at least as much adult as child, and usually more adult than child ... It seems to me a weakness, not a strength, that in a book intended *for* children, a writer should adapt language and content to accommodate children, but not the narrative voice ... frequently Alan Garner's narrator does not talk to children at all ... he, like so many other writers and critics, believes that a good children's book must satisfy adults.<sup>16</sup>

As in Chapter 1, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the assumptions that underpin these different critical approaches to Dahl's and Garner's work and, in particular, to focus on the first two questions outlined in my Introduction.

The critics under discussion here have drawn from a range of contemporary critical theories. Instead of sorting out these critics into various positions – structuralist, poststructuralist, reader-oriented and so on (noting the diversity of views within and

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12 Many of the critics on Garner referenced in my bibliography have chosen to treat his work as adult literature rather than 'children's literature' (I briefly discussed this issue in Chapter 1). See, for example, Philip, *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner*; Michael Lockwood, "'A Sense of the Spoken': Language in *The Owl Service*", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1992), pp. 83-92; Andrew Taylor, "Polishing Up the Pattern: The Ending of *The Owl Service*", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1992), pp. 93-100; Maria Nikolajeva, "The Insignificance of Time: *Red Shift*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1989), pp. 128-131; Mavis Reimer, "The Family as Mythic Reservoir in Alan Garner's *Stone Book* Quartet", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1989), pp. 132-135; and Victor Watson, "In Defense of Jan: Love and Betrayal in *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift*". *Signal*, no. 41 (1983), pp. 77-87. I will briefly discuss this work in Appendix C.

13 See *Booktalk*, pp. 14-33; "An Interview with Alan Garner" in *The Signal Approach to Children's Books*, ed. N. Chambers, pp. 276-278; and "Letter from England: A Matter of Balance", *Horn Book*, vol. 53, no. 4 (1977), pp. 479-482. (As mentioned in Chapter 1, I will also briefly discuss the differences between these commentaries and Chambers' earlier work on Garner in "Letter from England: Literary Crossword Puzzle ... or Masterpiece?" [1973], where Chambers maintained that Garner had "given up any pretence of writing for children" [p. 497].)

14 Chambers, *Booktalk*, pp. 30-31.

15 See Wall, *The Narrator's Voice*, particularly pp. 229-233.

16 Wall, *The Narrator's Voice*, pp. 230-231 and p. 232. Further references will be in the text.



overlaps between these theoretical standpoints, as well as the problems with such classifications<sup>17</sup>), my discussion will centre on a number of common issues that emerge in their critical commentaries. Similarly, rather than discussing first one group of critics on Dahl's/Garner's work and then the other group, I have sought to open a dialogue between these critics' different critical stances in regard to each of the issues under discussion.

## Issues in critical discourse: Dahl

### *Privileging metafictional ('open') texts*

Both groups of critics on Dahl's work express a preference for a metafictional child literature, for the text that "self-consciously draws attention to its status as text and as fictive" and is characterised by such features as wordplay, typographical innovations, narrative disruptions and intrusions, and unresolved endings.<sup>18</sup>

Drawing on Dahl's *The Twits* and Blyton's *The Secret Seven*, and basing in part his findings on the reading experiences of a group of primary school children, Sarland seeks to counter the common assertion that books popular with children (that are frequently dismissed as 'popular fiction' and regarded, as we saw with Cameron and a number of other critics, as beneath serious critical attention) are limiting in their use of language, narrative technique and subject matter, as well as repressive in their ethics/politics.<sup>19</sup> He highlights aspects of Dahl's books that challenge a particular set of conventions of writing for children that he perceives to have been privileged by many child literature critics in the past: "[w]hen John Fowles offers the reader alternative endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; or when Italo Calvino begins his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* thus, 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel' ... neither author is doing anything qualitatively different from what Dahl is doing". Dahl uses a variety of narrative techniques and "the whole idea of a straightforward story straightforwardly told proves to be something of an illusion" (p. 167). He tells "three separate stories without at all making their relationship in time clear" and "constructs a veritably labyrinthine set of narrative levels" (p. 169).

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17 However, Chapters 4 through 6 will look more closely at these developments in contemporary critical theory, and trace a number of linkages with my conclusions in this chapter.

18 Robyn McCallum, "Metafictions and Experimental Work", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, p. 397. Other terms for the 'metafictional' include 'postmodernist', 'interrogative', 'open' and 'experimental'. (The Russian Formalists' preference for texts self-consciously calling attention to the fiction making process – 'laying bare' their narrative structure – and for literary devices producing the effect of 'defamiliarisation' is also part of this tradition. See also Bertold Brecht and the notion of 'alienation effect'.) As I will discuss, the term 'metafictional' when used reductively raises similar issues to the term 'classic realist' when it too is used reductively. And, when both terms are placed in strong opposition to one another, there are further difficulties.

19 "Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?" p. 155. Further references will be in the text.

This brings me to Hunt's less favourable comments on Dahl's work. Like Sarland, Hunt maintains that child fiction should be "innovative", "experimental" and "open", it should challenge (confront/liberate) child readers: "the whole thrust of those who might be called the true frontierspeople of children's *literature* is for innovative *form*. To break the ideological deadlock which either openly tries to use the book as a social weapon ... or strives to keep the book the same, we must experiment". Child books, Hunt continues, "should be mind-expanding and developmental", they should be "'open' and should confront, not confirm".<sup>20</sup> Unlike Sarland, however, Hunt argues that Dahl's work fails to meet these key criteria.

There are merits to both Sarland's and Hunt's positions here in terms of their seeking to break down limited and limiting conventional stereotypes about how child texts should look. Sarland observes, for example, that the "assumption is often made that children require conventional techniques of presentation and narrative and that they can't handle anything out of the ordinary" (p. 166) but points to child readers' ease in dealing with the self-conscious narrator in Dahl's *The Twits* to contest such a viewpoint: "[s]uch an alienation device, unacceptable in children's books we are sometimes told, is clearly easy enough for seven-year-olds to handle" (p. 167). As my discussion in Part One suggests, Sarland and Hunt have a point about the dominance of certain book-centred norms in child literature and its criticism. A particular aesthetic/set of conventions has been privileged by many child literature critics. Their comments are also supported by Rose's observations about the "relative exclusion of modernist experimentation from children's books ... the idea that modernist writing is too difficult or disturbing for children who *need* the regulation of narrative form" (p. 142). However in arguing that experimental ("modernist") elements are indeed present in Dahl's child books, Sarland's commentary serves to underline that the exclusion of such elements is as much a function of critics as it is of texts themselves – that some critics have not emphasised these elements (and particularly not in relation to popular fiction). Similarly, the presence of such elements is also as much a function of critics as of texts.

Nevertheless, while there are merits to Sarland's and Hunt's position here, in taking that position one needs to be careful not to fall into a number of traps such as suggesting that child readers somehow have a natural affinity with such texts; taking up contradictory conceptions of language and meaning (maintaining the instability of language and meaning and the variety in different readers' responses to the text, for example, while simultaneously casting the metafictional text as a stable, timeless entity and therefore shutting down to some extent the plural nature of readers' responses to the text); lumping together openness with a progressive ethics and politics; and/or implying that the critic/author must choose between either 'metafiction' or 'classic realism'.

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20 *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 153 and p. 163.

Many of these traps resemble variations of those I discussed in Chapter 1. Both book-centred *and* contemporary critics are in danger of rebounding endlessly and ineffectually between oppositional terms with all the problems and contradictions that go along with such an oppositional stance, and of assuming a rigid, narrow preference for a book that fulfils a set, expected narrative pattern (whether 'metafictional' or 'classic realist'). I will comment on these difficulties further in Chapter 6 when I undertake a detailed study of Hunt's broader theoretical position.

*'Genuine children's literature' = that which addresses/appeals to the 'child narratee', 'implied child reader', 'child culture' and/or 'child subconscious'*

Both groups of critics on Dahl have sought to approach child literature from the perspective of child readers and have done so by employing an interpretive construct: 'the child narratee' (Wall), 'the implied child reader' (Hunt, Chambers, Chesterfield-Evans and Shavit), 'child culture' (Hunt and Sarland) and 'the child subconscious' (West and Petzold).

(a) *The Child Narratee*

Wall explores the relationship between narrator and narratee (the figure narrated in the text who is the recipient of the narrative) as a way of determining whether or not a book is a 'genuine children's book': "the relationship of narrator to narratee is the one characteristic by which fiction genuinely for children can be distinguished from other fiction ... the distinguishing marker of the genre *writing for children* is direct address to children" (p. 234). By this definition, Wall excludes from the genre Garner's later work (most notably the *Stone Book Quartet*) and includes as firmly part of the genre Dahl's work.

Her brief remarks on Dahl's *The Twits* are interesting. She argues that Dahl "has even more than Blyton flaunted his courting of the child reader" (p. 193) for the narrator in *The Twits* not only addresses the child narratee directly but attempts to "establish a new kind of narrator-narratee relationship":

[Dahl] is frequently seen as a subversive writer; if he is so, it is ... because he ranges himself, not merely, like Blyton, with children, but with children against adults. His stance shows him assuming that children will join with him and squirm delightedly at what many adults will find either nauseating or disgusting, will squirm all the more delightedly in fact because they do so with the approval of the adult who has joined them. There can be little doubt that Dahl's willingness to acknowledge the existence of his child readers and to do so by playing the game of joining them has played a part in his popularity with children. (pp. 193-194)

While I want to comment on Wall's position in further detail in Chapter 4, including some elaboration of the narrative theory upon which she draws, I would make one initial point here: that the concepts of narratee and narrator are interpretative (textual) constructs and need to be viewed as such. They are constructed by the critic to interpret the text. As I

will discuss in the following chapter, Wall implies that her concept of the child narratee can lead out to definitive answers about actual child readers' responses to the text and what represents 'genuine children's fiction', but her concepts of 'the child narratee', 'the child reader's response' and 'children's fiction' are founded upon a prior assumption of 'the child' as a stable, unproblematic concept – that 'children's fiction', as Rose suggests, "rests upon the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple" (p. 1). The critic's involvement in the construction of 'the child' is therefore of particular interest. (I will have something more to say about these issues in concluding this chapter, in particular about the circularity of interpretation and the broader epistemological question of claims to knowledge about children and their reading experiences.)

(b) *The implied child reader*

Hunt draws upon similar developments in narratology/narrative theory as Wall (although he prefers to focus on the more general concept of the child reader implied by the text rather than on the child reader narrated in the text) but takes a position on Dahl diametrically opposed to Wall's<sup>21</sup>: "[i]t is no accident that ... several of Roald Dahl's books have proved popular with adults as well as children: the audience implied in the books is as much an adult one as a child one".<sup>22</sup> Hunt argues that conventional narrative theory is underpinned by "an appeal to a common culture" but that "the culture of the primary readers of children's literature is not necessarily common with ours". Accordingly, he suggests that such a theory should recognise that its analyses of child literature are "more than usually provisional". In terms of "the child culture" encountering texts, "we may have to accept counter-readings or 'misreadings' in terms of narrative analysis, as an inevitable part of the complex process of reading the children's book".<sup>23</sup>

Hunt's most recent work has centred on defining and exploring a 'childist' criticism of child literature, where adult critics endeavour to read the text as child readers might read it: "we have to challenge all our assumptions, question every reaction, and ask what reading as a child actually means".<sup>24</sup> Hunt's approach therefore raises a number of important questions about the construction of child culture and the (implied) child reader. However, his own involvement in the construction of these concepts is of particular interest. Hunt's so-called childist reading of Dahl's work only serves to underline the

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21 In this regard it is not surprising that, while Wall regards Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Methuen, London, 1983) as a "useful introduction to narratology" (p. 3), Hunt regards Rimmon-Kenan's book as a "leadene 'naming of parts' exercise", *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 119.

22 *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 46.

23 "Necessary Misreadings: Directions in Narrative Theory for Children's Literature", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1985), p. 108 and p. 109.

24 *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 191.

availability of these concepts to reinforce his position:

[a] sceptic might assume that a childist reading would produce a list of 'good' books in childist terms which would correspond to the books that children choose in popularity polls (Judy Blume and *Black Beauty*) or which sell most paperbacks (Blyton, Dahl, *The Hardy Boys*) – but I doubt it ... Such books are part of our mass-market culture, not the child's. To a large extent we will have to see *around* these adult-generated preferences to get at the common factors of genuine appeal.<sup>25</sup>

I will return to the concept of child culture shortly.

Chambers, Chesterfield-Evans and Shavit also employ the concept of the implied child reader in their commentaries on Dahl. In 1959 Dahl published a short story for adults called "The Champion of the World" and in 1975 he reworked the story for children (incorporating some sections verbatim from the adult book) under the title *Danny, the Champion of the World*.<sup>26</sup> These three critics have examined the differences between these stories, focusing on how the implied reader in each version differs. The primary concern of both Chesterfield-Evans and Shavit is Dahl's different handling of the poaching motif in the two books.<sup>27</sup> All three commentators are critical, however, of the way that the adult storyteller in Dahl's child version seeks to control and place limitations on the implied child reader. While, like Wall, they agree that Dahl's books are addressed to an implied child reader/child narratee, unlike Wall they argue that his work is not *for* child readers (for real child readers outside of the book) because it does not demand enough of those readers in its use of language and Dahl finally aligns himself with adults against children (this also recalls Hunt's position on Dahl).

Chambers, for example, argues that Dahl achieves a tone of voice that is "clear, uncluttered, unobtrusive, not very demanding linguistically, and which sets up a sense of [an] intimate, yet adult controlled, relationship between his second self and his implied

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<sup>25</sup> "Childist Criticism: The Subculture of the Child, the Book and the Critic", p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> "The Champion of the World", in *Kiss, Kiss* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), pp. 225-255. The adult book launches straight into the episode where Mr Hazel's (differently spelt in the two tellings) pheasants are drugged with sleeping tablets. The child version, however, contains substantial introductory descriptions about the relationship between Danny and his father and his father's previous poaching exploits before building up to the same episode described above, when the action then begins to parallel the adult story almost exactly. The endings also differ, for the adult story ends with Mr Hazel driving up to the 'scene of the crime' while in the child story Mr Hazell discovers that all his pheasants have been spirited away and he is humiliated in front of the village. Further, the adult version has two adult characters – Claud and Gordon – while the child version has a child and a parent character – Danny and his father.

<sup>27</sup> The first part of the child book, Chesterfield-Evans observes, involves Danny's father justifying poaching as sport rather than as stealing but no commentary on "the reasons or morality of poaching" is included in the adult book, "Roald Dahl: A Discussion and Comparison of his Stories for Children and Adults", p. 166. The controversial subject matter of Dahl's story – poaching (stealing) – and the need to justify this activity to children is, Shavit suggests, behind the expansion of the 27 page adult short-story into the 173 page child novel: "[t]he most obvious step Dahl had to take was to 'neutralize' the subject by legitimizing both the subject and the attitudes presented in the text", "A Test Case: Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*", p. 45.

child reader" – it is "the tone of a friendly adult storyteller who knows how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place".<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Shavit draws attention to the "systematic constraints of the implied reader" in Dahl's adaptation of the story for children.<sup>29</sup> Chesterfield-Evans further comments on the way that Dahl's adaptation of the story for children seeks to "draw the child reader into the story": "*Danny* is markedly simplistic in style, and little is left to the imagination – the child reader is informed of *all* the facts".<sup>30</sup> All three commentators imply that Dahl's child story is insufficiently innovative and 'open' in its narrative techniques and that it is therefore neither genuinely *for* child readers nor liberating of those readers in its ethical/political values. This privileging of metafictional ('open') texts again raises a series of issues, particularly in terms of critics assuming an oppositional stance on the respective merits of 'open' versus 'closed' texts. In much the same way that Sarland points to Fowles and Calvino as role models for authors of child literature, for example, Chambers states that "reading B. S. Johnson, James Joyce, Donald Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut" (all of whom are usually regarded as 'postmodernist' authors) helps to show "the considerable technical limitations of many children's authors, and the considerable skill of a few".<sup>31</sup> As with the book-centred critics, a particular aesthetic is being held up as the ideal to which all literature should strive. Chambers regards a metafictional aesthetic as representing a "skilled" writing technique and other modes of writing as "limited".

Wall has challenged Chambers' approach in this context: "not all of his assumptions about children's writings, now and in the past, and about children as readers, stand up to analysis" (p. 9). She argues that his conclusions about Dahl's work, for example, reveal a reductive critical viewpoint based on the questionable concept of a 'traditional rhetoric of child fiction': "[Chambers] speaks of what he believes is 'traditionally the English tone used in telling stories to children: direct, clear, polite, firm, uncluttered'" (p. 39; Wall quotes Chambers p. 270). Wall maintains that a more considered scrutiny of so-called 'traditional' child literature reveals that it does not enshrine a particular way of speaking to children and that the variety of ways of addressing children cannot therefore be solely attributed to the 'rise' of metafictional child texts. In this way, she points to Chambers' construction of the 'implied narrator' and 'implied child reader' as concepts to buttress his own critical position.

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28 Chambers, "The Reader in the Book", p. 256. Further references will be in the text.

29 "A Test Case: Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*", p. 43. (Further references will be in the text.) Shavit highlights the difference in approach between Dahl's adult and child versions – "ambiguous attitudes versus unequivocal attitudes" and "'open' ending versus 'happy' ending" (p. 45) – and the way that the adult story leaves puzzling gaps for readers while the child story immediately resolves them: "[t]he authoritative narrator of the children's version never reveals such ignorance. He never leaves events unexplained" (p. 47).

30 "Roald Dahl: A Discussion and Comparison of his Stories for Children and Adults", p. 167. Further references will be in the text.

31 *Booktalk*, p. 121.

Chambers, Shavit and Chesterfield-Evans, in highlighting Dahl's impositions on the implied child reader, also assume that actual child readers (the readers outside of the book) will be manipulated by Dahl's child story. There is never any discussion, however, about these actual child readers' responses to the text. As Nancy Huse observes of Shavit's work, there is a "weakness of theorising without information about children's realization of texts (a realization she nonetheless asserts as uniformly different from that of adults)".<sup>32</sup> In this way, it appears that the image of 'the child reader outside of the book' simply matches up with the image of 'the implied child reader in the book'. There is a need, as Susan Suleiman rightly points out, to recognise that the concepts of 'the implied reader' and 'the implied author' are "*interpretive concepts* and, as such, participate in the circularity of all interpretation. I construct the images of the implied author and implied reader gradually as I read a work, and then use the images I have constructed to validate my reading".<sup>33</sup> The implied child reader is used to construct an image of real child readers which in turn is used to construct the meaning of the text which in turn is used to construct the image of the implied child reader and so on.

As I will discuss in later chapters, this is to touch upon the notion of the 'hermeneutic circle': the circularity of interpretation/understanding in that all interpretation/understanding is presuppositional. As Heidegger and Gadamer have emphasised, interpretation is 'prejudiced' ('prestructured'): there is no presuppositionless knowledge (knowledge resting upon an objective foundation).<sup>34</sup> This circularity does not make concepts such as 'the implied child reader' and approaches that draw upon these concepts superfluous so much as draw attention to the critic's involvement in the construction of these concepts and point to occasions where a critic has sought to put forward his/her interpretation as having a higher validity (and therefore immunity from critique) because it is based upon an objective foundation. Chesterfield-Evans, for example, argues that Dahl's stories for children and his stories for adults are "channelled with unerring accuracy towards two very diverse and distinct audiences" (p. 165). The reader *implied* in Dahl's adaptation of the story of *Danny* for children is definitely a child, he claims, because the "words are shorter and more child-oriented" (p. 168). This in turn suggests that *actual* child readers require a 'simpler' language (such a language is more

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32 "Poetry, Poetics and Pedagogy", *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1989), p. 126.

33 "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism", in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. eds, Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 11.

34 To view the circularity involved in all understanding/interpretation as something that could be overcome is a false viewpoint. It is not possible to break out of this circularity (in the notion *either* that truly objective, foundational, presuppositionless knowledge is possible *or* that we are faced with an endless scepticism) but rather a matter of learning how to do without ultimate foundations. As Fish observes, "[t]he choice is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself", *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 167. (I will discuss Heidegger's and Gadamer's work later in this thesis.)

'child-oriented'). And again, this in turn defines Dahl's story as a 'children's book'. Further, Chesterfield-Evans has (apparently) strengthened his position beyond question because his concept of 'the implied child reader' rests upon an objective foundation: the knowable, stable, timeless child. 'The implied child reader' is therefore constructed in much the same way as 'the child narratee' and 'child culture' are constructed (they are perceived to be but are not objectively verifiable or stable) and 'the implied child reader' and 'the real child reader' are perceived to be analogous concepts. This brings me back to the concept of 'child culture'.

(c) '*Child culture*'

A number of critics who have drawn upon narrative theory, such as Hunt and Sarland, have placed a strong emphasis on the concept of 'child culture' – a culture that is different from/in opposition to 'adult culture'. Sarland has claimed that the innovative narrative techniques in Dahl's child books are no different from those in 'postmodernist' adult books ("virtually every technique that is available to adult authors may be found in embryo form here" [p. 170]) but concludes that child readers can cope with such techniques only so long as the subject matter of the book is of interest to 'child culture':

[m]y case is that it is the subject matter rather than the technique that makes Fowles and Calvino adult authors and Dahl ... a children's author (p. 167) ... Children can manage quite complicated time shifts, changes in narratorial stance and function, so long as these techniques move the story on, developing the themes that they are interested in ... What I am saying, in essence, is that children are remarkably competent at handling all sorts of technical devices of storytelling provided that the story is clearly of their culture, for them. (p. 170)

Sarland suggests that in *The Twits*, for example, Dahl "explores the limits of the *child's* world: most adults are not particularly interested in mashed worms, shrinking, or in fantasizing about the potentialities of superglue. The tricks that the Twits play on each other are the tricks that *children* would like to play on each other" (p. 162). In subject matter and content, Sarland concludes, *The Twits* is "plainly part of the culture of childhood. And not only that, it explores themes and interests that many adults would rather not know about. In that sense it is part of an oppositional culture" (p. 162). The notion of 'child culture' is again not without problems. There is, for instance, Hunt's different construction of 'child culture' to contend with, a culture that (unlike Sarland) he claims *does not* identify with the 'child culture' depicted in Dahl's books. Such a term also massively generalises about the different cultures of individual children, homogenised here into one 'child culture'. And how are we ever to isolate a/the child's 'own' culture – how are we to recognise what is the child's own as opposed to what adult culture has already implanted? Implicit in Sarland's remarks is the notion that 'child culture' is fixed and stable in its meaning, that it can be appealed to objectively and unproblematically. But where does 'child culture' end and 'adult culture' begin? If, as Rose has suggested from her re-reading of Freud, "childhood is something in which we



continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind" (p. 12) and if childhood is not "an object", something "separate" that can be "scrutinised and assessed" (p. 13), then what is the 'culture of childhood' other than something we create and recreate as adults? This also introduces broader epistemological issues into the discussion concerning claims to knowledge about children. My questions here – 'how are we ever to isolate the child's own culture', for example – are in this context deliberately provocative and can easily slide into the kind of 'either-or-ism' I discussed in earlier chapters: that *either* there are elements that can be definitively identified as part of the child's own culture *or* there are no elements that we might, howsoever provisionally, identify as part of (individual) children's cultures – either there is final certainty or there is endless scepticism.

(d) *The child subconscious'*

West undertakes a psychoanalytical reading of Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* and, like other critics, seeks to understand why adults and children respond differently to Dahl's work: "Dahl's fantasies for children have always been popular with young readers, but they have not always been given a warm reception by the critics".<sup>35</sup> This time it is the appeal of Dahl's work to 'the child's subconscious' that is the key issue. West draws on the findings of child psychologists (Anna Freud and Melanie Klein) that "children often engage in regressive fantasies when faced with ego threatening problems and anxieties" to put forward a reason for Dahl's popularity with children, namely, that Dahl provides children with "a framework to work through their own fantasies about regression" (p. 220). At the end of *James and the Giant Peach*, for example, James "is ready to re-enter society. He is no longer the miserable, guilt-ridden, withdrawn character that he was in the beginning of the book. He has become, instead, a cheerful and capable boy who desires the company of other children" (p. 223). Dahl's book, West argues, therefore provides a "healthy regression" outlet for children – a healthy regression "'has a definite beginning and end, is completely reversible, and is a function of successful adaptation to stress or change.' James's regression meets all of these criteria, and this partly explains why many children find the story so satisfying" (p. 224).

West's essay raises a number of questions. It seems to imply (whether he means it to or not) that adults do not share children's regressive fantasies and that this is the reason why they respond differently to Dahl's work – James' regression appeals only to child readers. In this way, he appears to suggest that (to use Rose's words) "childhood is part of a strict developmental sequence at the end of which stands the cohered and rational consciousness of the adult mind" (p. 13). For West, the purpose of Dahl's work seems to be "to allow the child that early instability or instance of disruption in order to ensure that

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35 "Regression and Fragmentation of the Self in *James and the Giant Peach*", p. 219. Further references will be in the text.

any such instability will, in the last analysis, be more effectively removed" (Rose, pp. 14-15). Hence, at the end of *James and the Giant Peach*, the child renounces his 'childish' fantasies and returns to 'normal', that is, back on the path to rational adulthood. "After his adventure", West states, "James successfully recovers from his period of regression ... he is able to make friends and sustain his self-confidence. In short, he learns how to cope with the demands of both his internal world and the external environment" (p. 224).

There is also the same circularity about West's interpretation. The child's subconscious desire (the urge to regress) reveals (validates) the meaning of the text (*James and the Giant Peach* is about children's urge to regress) which in turn reveals (validates) the meaning of the child's subconscious desire (the urge to regress) which in turn reveals (validates) the meaning of the text and so on. The issue here, as I have discussed, is not so much that West's concept of the child's subconscious participates in a circularity of interpretation but to highlight his *involvement* in the construction of this concept and draw attention to whether, having once established this concept, he employs it in a *consistent* way (as well as to consider whether he regards 'the child's subconscious' as somehow unproblematic and finally stable, as providing an objective foundation for knowledge).

Petzold, for example, (like West) suggests that Dahl's books offer children a way of working through psychic disturbances. The motif of the "sensitive, highly gifted" Matilda, at the mercy of "insensitive parents" and "sadistic teachers"<sup>36</sup> in Dahl's *Matilda*, he comments, "appeals to our subconscious in a particularly powerful way" (p. 188). The "pity" we feel for the child's plight and the "exultation" with which we greet his or her success, is "so keen because we have all felt ourselves to be in the same situation ... at one stage or another in our lives" (p. 188). Petzold claims that the "central fantasy" of the neglected-child theme is therefore "universal" (p. 188) and engenders "feelings which will continue to accompany every child's life (and every adult's, for that matter)" (p. 189) – it appeals to a subconscious fear in everyone. However, he later falls into a contradictory stance here when he suggests that this theme has in fact only *limited* appeal. It appeals to a subconscious fear in all children but only in *some* adults: some adults will be "unable to identify regressively with the rebellious hero" in *Matilda* and so will "dislike such fantasies" (p. 191). In this way, the concept of 'the subconscious' appears to be at Petzold's disposal, to be constructed and then manipulated as and when he chooses. Used consistently, such a concept might guarantee the internal consistency of Petzold's reading of Dahl's work (although not its validity in any absolute sense) but Petzold's contradictory use of this concept calls his approach into question. West falls into a similar contradictory stance on the apparent difference between 'adult humour' and 'child

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<sup>36</sup> "Wish-fulfilment and Subversion: Roald Dahl's Dickensian Fantasy *Matilda*", p. 187. Further references will be in the text.

humour',<sup>37</sup> again raising questions about how these concepts have been constructed and pointing to difficulties with his approach.

Finally, West is engaged in what at times seems a crude hunt for symbols: the giant peach is a fantasy womb where James will find the security and warmth for which he subconsciously longs, the tunnel into the peach is a symbolic birthing canal (p. 221), and James is reborn when the peach falls out of the sky and is impaled on the spire of the Empire State Building: "[t]hus, James owes his life to a symbolic representation of sexual intercourse, just as a newborn infant's life stems from the sexual union of his or her parents" (p. 223). Symbolism has been identified by Rose, with biography, as the two forms of Freudian analysis that have traditionally been associated with child fiction, both presupposing "a pure point of origin lurking behind the text which we, as adults and critics, can trace" (p. 19).

*'The child'/'child culture' is innocent of the divisions (class, race, gender) that are part of 'adult culture'*

Sarland is particularly concerned with the "moral and political framework" (p. 157) of Dahl's books and seeks to demonstrate that Dahl's work is not only innovative in its narrative techniques but that, read from the perspective of 'child culture', it is more liberating in its treatment of ethics and politics than most critics have generally allowed. He suggests that, while the framework for Dahl's books is "sexist, middle-class, right-wing, [and] snobbish" (p. 170), Dahl explores within such a framework a challenge to that cultural order – and it is this challenge that child readers absorb:

within avowedly undesirable ideological frameworks [Dahl] develops stories that specifically challenge those very frameworks, even though they are not finally overthrown. My contention is that it is the challenge to the cultural order that children find absorbing rather than the re-establishment of it at the end of the stories. (p. 171)

In this context, Sarland highlights the theme of "reversal-of-power" (p. 161) in *The Twits*. He provides two readings of *The Twits* to argue his point. In his first reading, Sarland emphasises how Dahl chooses an element in society (in this case, hairy men, as

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<sup>37</sup> "Adults often deplore as tasteless", West suggests, "many of the stories [and] situations ... that children find humorous", "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children", p. 115. This difference in response can be explained, he argues, by the "differences in the psychology of children and adults". Children often use humour as a way of dealing with their anxieties. Much of the humour in *The Twits*, he observes, is similar to "the jokes that children make about cleanliness [and] bodily functions" (p. 115). Adults find different ways of dealing with these anxieties and no longer make such jokes or find them funny. Another aspect of Dahl's humour that appeals to children is that adults are often the target of his jokes: "[p]sychologists have long noted that children enjoy jokes and stories that poke fun at the moral authority of adults" (p. 115). However, while in this way West maintains that child humour is different from adult humour, he later paradoxically suggests that this is not the case: "Jacob's mother ... pronounced the book [Dahl's *The Twits*] disgusting and left the room. Jacob [a child of four] and I, however, were laughing so hard that we hardly noticed her departure" (p. 116).

represented by Mr Twit), holds it up to ridicule and then destroys it. Although cooperative action is required to destroy Mr Twit, the group do not act until they are ordered to do so by their leader. Hence, "on the one hand Dahl presents us with a fascist world in which certain elements of society become scapegoats and ripe for destruction" and where the mass of people cannot help themselves "but are dependent instead upon the emergence of a charismatic leader who tells them what to do". In this reading, Sarland acknowledges that he is an adult reader with well-developed "political antennae" but suggests that for child readers "other issues may be more important" (p. 162).

In his second ('child-oriented') reading, Sarland points out that an important element of the Twits' nastiness is their "arbitrary exercise of authority". "On the other hand", therefore, Dahl "presents us with a world where arbitrary authority can be overthrown by co-operative group action and where that overthrow is achieved by ... insisting upon other possible orderings of the world". Dahl, he concludes, finally emphasises the "legitimacy of childhood concerns in the face of adult euphemism and hypocrisy" (p. 162). Sarland suggests that child readers are likely to pick up on this more positive message because it holds the greater appeal to 'child culture'. Implicit in Sarland's argument then, is the suggestion that because the book is part of 'child culture', and that culture is inclined to respond to the more positive ethical/political message in the book, this should soften adult objections concerning the more questionable ethical/political aspects of the book. However, his position raises several issues. He assumes that his construction of the term 'child culture' leads out to real child readers and to their actual responses to the book. He also appears to be suppressing his own (adult) response to Dahl's work and privileging child readers' (apparent) responses, so creating the impression that if a child book is questionable on ethical and political grounds, but *only* in terms of a 'well developed *adult* political antennae', these concerns do not matter. This in turn implies that 'the child' and 'child culture' are somehow free (innocent?) of the ethical and political difficulties that concern adults (although, as Rose has emphasised, children form a part of these difficulties/divisions just as much as adults) and, further, that adults might also then escape from/evade these difficulties through 'the child' and 'children's literature'. As this suggests, Sarland's reading of the text is itself not without ethical/political implications.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Chambers falls into similar difficulties with his appraisal of Lucy Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*. While he at first acknowledges that the book is "deeply conservative and traditionalist" in its class assumptions, he later dismisses these concerns, observing that "this is a political attitude which disposes children all the more readily to the story, for most children prefer things to remain as they have always been" (p. 275). This statement carries with it not only an assumption about the responses of actual child readers to the book (without any discussion of how he has arrived at such an assessment) but again conveys the suggestion that the problematic ethics/politics of a book do not in fact matter if the book is 'genuinely *for* children' – 'the child' is constructed as being innocent of the divisions of class.

Culley turns to the responses of a group of child readers (aged between the ages of six and eleven) to Dahl's *The Twits* to specifically test Sarland's contention that child readers will pick up on the more positive ethics and politics of the book because of its relevance to 'child culture'. Based on empirical research on child readers' responses, Culley suggests (contrary to Sarland) that children in fact pick up on the underlying "fascist" message in Dahl's *The Twits*. When questioned about whether the Twits had deserved their fate, Culley reports that one child responded, "Yes. They were ugly".<sup>39</sup> The child has made a causal link between the characters' physical characteristics and their personalities and this reaction, Culley observes, "must give some cause for concern" (pp. 61-62). It is interesting, however, that Culley himself later moves away from this position, implying that this aspect of Dahl's book is not after all a cause for concern because "children, through experience, realize that a variety of personalities can be found within a variety of external appearances". They have "a familiarity with the conventions of folklore that allows them to operate two distinct schemes of reference, one within the book and one without" (p. 62).

The assumption here is that, because Dahl's work draws on the conventions of folklore and the fairy tale (which are in turn a part of 'child culture'), this somehow overcomes objections concerning the book's questionable ethics and politics. This is a common theme in a number of the commentaries on Dahl's work, as I discussed in Chapter 1 in regard to Merrick's commentary on Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Culley points to the close links between Dahl's work and the "highly conventional tradition of folklore" (p. 63) and implies that this connection absolves Dahl of charges of violence and sexism. The violence in Dahl's books is "*familiar*" to child readers who have "embraced folklore and fairy tales". It is violence that is "superficially horrific, yet *unreal*" (p. 63, emphasis added). Similarly, in depicting witches as women in *The Witches* (something for which Dahl has come in for much criticism on the grounds of sexism<sup>40</sup>), he states that Dahl is drawing from a tradition of conventionalised characters – "[w]itches *are* women in folklore" – and this is "merely Dahl's faithfulness to folklore conventions" (p. 64). "I hope that by showing how squarely Dahl lies within the field of folklore", Culley concludes, "I have *absolved* him of his supposed crimes of violence and sexism" (p. 64, emphasis added). Children, through their close link with the fairy tale, are familiar with these concerns and so they do not matter. Again it appears that Culley is seeking to evade these divisions (of gender) and difficulties (of violence) through 'the child' and 'children's fiction'. The assumption is that both somehow sit outside ethics and politics.

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39 "Roald Dahl: 'It's About Children and It's for Children' – But Is It Suitable?" p. 61. Further references will be in the text.

40 See, for example, Michelle Landsberg on Dahl's "misogyny", *The World of Children's Books: A Guide to Choosing the Best* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 89, and Catherine Itza: "womenhatred is at the core of Dahl's writing", "Bewitching the Boys", *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 December 1985, p. 13.

Petzold also draws attention to the links between Dahl's work and fairy tale, and takes a similar stance on the problematic ethics and politics of Dahl's books – that these concerns can be cancelled out if the book is of 'child culture'.<sup>41</sup>

Hunt uses this same term 'child culture', as we have seen, but takes a position on Dahl's work in terms of its ethics and politics that is completely the opposite of Sarland's. For Hunt, Dahl's books are repressive, rather than liberating, in their ethical and political values: the 'child culture' portrayed in Dahl's books is "the 'acceptable face' of childhood, a mildly anarchic rebellion allowed by the ruling adult culture" (p. 190). He argues that "Dahl, by defining the acceptably unacceptable, is simply part of the regulatory system, part of the learning process" (p. 191). Although Dahl's fiction may appear to relate to 'child culture', it in fact encourages child readers to adopt an adult definition of 'child culture' (whatever that might be), to laugh at things that adults think children should laugh at, and to be anarchic in a way that adults approve of children being anarchic. It also encourages children to adopt 'adult prejudices', for "does the child's culture", Hunt asks, "automatically comprehend the prejudices of the adult culture: male versus female, black versus white ... acceptable versus unacceptable" (p. 190)? Through Dahl's fiction, children therefore learn what adults define as unacceptable and what prejudices adults hold about gender, class, race and so on. However, Hunt's reading implies that 'the child' comes to the book free (innocent) of these prejudices (such as racism and sexism), that 'the child' is outside these prejudices. The question this raises is what investment adult critics might have in so constructing 'the child'.<sup>42</sup>

My comments here touch upon a range of important issues concerning not only the differences in critical opinion on Dahl's child fiction but also the more fundamental differences in opinion in society in general concerning what should constitute the

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<sup>41</sup> Petzold observes that *Matilda* is "a fairy tale in disguise": Miss Trunchbull is the "ogre", Miss Honey is "the kind helper and the princess in need of being rescued, rolled into one" and *Matilda* is the "typical fairy-tale hero", both gifted and isolated, "Wish-fulfilment and Subversion: Roald Dahl's Dickensian Fantasy *Matilda*", p. 186. See also Stephanie Owen Reeder, *Matilda* has "all the elements of the true fairytale", "Review of *Matilda*", *Magpies*, 3 [July 1988], p. 4.) Petzold is critical of the "glaring didacticism" in Dahl's books: his child characters are "far too obedient" and "polite and sensible" (p. 190). "If anything", he continues, "[Dahl] might be accused of being too blatant an advocate of old-fashioned morality" (p. 191). Having voiced these objections, however, Petzold (in a pattern that has become familiar) suggests that the relationship between Dahl's fiction and fairy tale, and the popularity of his books with child readers, somehow cancels out his earlier concerns: "[w]e should not forget ... that Dahl's books, in spite of their didacticism, set out first and foremost to give their readers pleasure. Although founded on reality, the story of *Matilda* takes off into pure fantasy [fairy tale], leaving didactic and satirical elements behind" (p. 191, emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> The widely diverging nature of the (ethical/political) interpretations of Dahl's work, even though underpinned by similar terms, is not so much the issue here. The conduct of critique does not rest on our arriving at judgements accepted by everyone and it is proper that critics should engage with each other's terms and question each other's approaches. Rather, these divergences reinforce the point that critics' use of concepts like 'child culture', 'the implied child reader', 'liberating' and 'repressive' are contested concepts.

interaction between adults and children, and the ethical and political context in relation to this interaction. A comprehensive discussion on such issues, involving an exploration of the shifts in the concepts of 'childhood' and 'adulthood' in society over time and across cultures, is beyond the scope of this thesis (although in its own way this thesis provides a narrow 'snap-shot' of such issues). Work in this area includes histories of childhood and child literature, and sociological and anthropological studies on children and education and parenting practices.<sup>43</sup> However, as this area is important for this thesis, a brief discussion on children, adults and society is included in Appendix D.

### *Upholding an informed (neutral?) ethical/political position*

As I suggested earlier, Hunt and Sarland express a preference for metafictional ('open') texts. Underpinning this preference is the assumption that such texts are progressive (liberating) in their ethics/politics. This notion has been challenged by many critics, as I discussed in previous chapters. Further, it also appears to be a small distance from claiming that such texts are ethically/politically progressive, to claiming that they are ethically/politically neutral. 'Open' texts, and the critical approaches that privilege such texts, are not however ethically/politically neutral just because they are ethically/politically informed.<sup>44</sup> Against this background, it is not surprising that Sarland's claims regarding the metafictional aspects of Dahl's work remain unexplored by Hunt, for to find Dahl's work metafictional ('open') would be to undermine the very assumptions that inform Hunt's critical approach – that openness equals a progressive ethics/politics. (I will return to this issue in relation to Hunt's work in Chapter 6.)

I will defer my summing up concerning these critical commentaries on Dahl's work until I have considered the critical commentaries on Garner's work.

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43 An early work on the history of childhood is Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). See also Linda Pollack's critique of Ariès' theory of childhood in *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). More recent studies include Anne Scott MacLeod, *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994). Nodelman also provides an overview of changing historical notions of childhood and child literature in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (New York: Longman, 1992). Histories of child literature include *Romanticism and Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. McGavran; Geoffrey Summerfield, *Fantasy and Reason: Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1984); Ruth MacDonald, *Literature for Children in England and America from 1646 to 1774* (Troy: Whitston, 1982); Samuel Pickering, *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth Century England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981); J. S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); and Mary V. Jackson, *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children's Literature in England from its Beginning to 1839* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

44 Wall has challenged Hunt's childist approach in this context, observing that while he draws attention to "the fact that children may have rights in fiction which are at odds with adult attitudes", he does not "consider the question of how writers address children in fiction, and how far it might be the right of child readers to be addressed as children, even to be directly addressed" (p. 199).

Wall maintains that Garner's later work, particularly the *Stone Book Quartet*, is not addressed to child readers. While it caters for children "by adapting language and viewpoint to accommodate them" (p. 231) and is printed in a large print format, it demands "the interpretive skills of experienced readers" (p. 229) and 'the implied reader' is "usually more adult than than child" (p. 231). The narrator of *The Stone Book* (the first book in the *Quartet*), Wall suggests, is "not concerned with his audience" (p. 229). Instead, the narrator maintains "a cool detachment" and does not "intervene" to comment for "young readers on the discrepancy between Mary's father's view of the limitations of a printed book and the author's own very real achievement, a book ringing with potential interpretations" (p. 231). Implicit here is the assumption that the narrator in a 'genuine children's book' should better guide child readers' responses. Wall argues that Garner's books satisfy an adult audience first and foremost, without reference (or with only a feigned reference) to child readers: "the first test of a good children's book should be that it is genuinely for children and not that it is comfortable for and extends adults" (p. 233).

In contrast to Wall's position, the *Stone Book Quartet* represents for Chambers the benchmark for innovative, 'genuine children's fiction': "the most impressive children's book ... to appear in England in 1976 was Alan Garner's *The Stone Book*". Garner has "revised the standards by which writing for children, and for younger children especially, must now be judged".<sup>46</sup> This has not always been Chambers' view, however. In an essay written in 1973 on Garner's *Red Shift*, he argued that Garner had "given up any pretence of writing for children" and was "now writing entirely to please himself and those mature, sophisticated, literate readers who care to study his work".<sup>47</sup> His earlier stance on Garner's books therefore resembled that of Wall.<sup>48</sup> Something therefore happened to alter Chambers' view that Garner was moving steadily "from the *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* to *Red Shift* in a direction that points away from child-manageable to adult-testing fiction".<sup>49</sup>

In *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children* (1985), Chambers maintains that "more attention should be paid to children's immediate reading interests, that we should respect their views and tastes, that we should publish more books that [speak]

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45 My discussion on contemporary critical discourse on Garner will be very brief because, as I have commented, many contemporary critics have chosen to treat his work as adult literature. (Their commentaries are discussed separately – see Appendix C.)

46 Chambers, "Letter from England: A Matter of Balance", p. 479 and p. 482.

47 "Letter from England: Literary Crossword Puzzle ... or Masterpiece?" p. 497. (This brings me to Chambers' pre-1977 work on Garner.)

48 As Wall has stated, Garner's books "demand, if they are to yield their full significance, the interpretative skills of experienced readers" (p. 229).

49 "Letter from England: A Matter of Balance", p. 479.



directly to them"<sup>50</sup> but draws the line at the argument that the only books that matter are those that children immediately like: "whether on an untutored reading children instantly liked the book" (p. 15). All this "came to a head", he comments, when *The Stone Book* was published. Chambers observes how he "grew tired of being told by teachers that children didn't like it, that they didn't think it was a children's book at all", when he knew from his own experience "that, given some help, children could find it one of the most stimulating books available" (p. 15). This sits uncomfortably, however, with other aspects of Chamber's position. Like Hunt, Chambers suggests that the best 'children's fiction' (the fiction that is genuinely for children) is that which is metafictional, which most challenges child readers: "[c]omplexity, multi-layering, richness of language, the kind of book which demands that the reader match the author in an act of creation that cost thought and energy" (p. 18). Garner's *The Stone Book*, is therefore viewed by Chambers as more overtly for children than many other books because it "best exemplifies" these features (p. 30). It does not underestimate or condescend to child readers. And yet, he has admitted that Garner's *The Stone Book* is only for children with the *intervention of adults*. Similarly, in an essay published before *Booktalk*, Chambers states that the "younger" readers of *The Stone Book* "may require the mediation of an adult in order to enter into such a profound experience".<sup>51</sup>

In this way, Chambers finally comes around to a view of Garner's work similar to Wall's (as discussed, she was critical of *The Stone Book* because its narrator did not "intervene" [p. 231]). Just as Wall argues that the narrator in a 'genuine children's book' should intervene to guide child readers' responses, Chambers implies that adults (teachers and parents) should intervene between 'genuine children's books' (those that lack a guiding narrator, for example) and child readers to make up for this deficiency. By advocating such intervention, however, Chambers appears to confirm Wall's observation: Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* is not written to children. Chambers' and Wall's emphasis on adult/narratorial intervention might also be regarded by some critics as limiting child readers' interaction with the text and the mark of a book that is 'not genuinely for children', implying that children need to be helped to appreciate what adults have already predetermined is a 'genuine children's book'. This calls into question not only the assumptions underpinning Chambers' notion of the metafictional text but also critics' notion of the 'genuine children's book' and their construction of 'the child' to buttress their own critical positions.

As this brief discussion demonstrates, Chambers' critical discourse on Garner's work (like the critical discourse on Dahl's work) reveals a similar privileging of metafictional texts and use of constructions like 'genuine children's literature' and 'the implied child

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50 *Booktalk*, p. 14. Further references will be in the text.

51 "The Reader in the Book", p. 261.

reader', attendant with the same pitfalls I raised earlier.

**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by contemporary critics? What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?**

To summarise then, this chapter has explored the first question raised in my Introduction in regard to contemporary critical discourse on Dahl's and Garner's work. Certain themes have emerged. The question these themes again raise brings me to my second question: what assumptions might lie behind these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse – what might be adults' investment here?

This discussion has illustrated some of the difficulties involved in approaching child literature from the perspective of child readers *through* interpretive constructs such as 'the child narratee', 'the implied child reader', 'child culture' and 'the child subconscious'. In approaching child literature through these constructs, all the various groups of critics discussed have supported the *liberation* of child readers from the trammels of a child literature that is limiting of child readers in its use of language; that is not addressed *to* child readers; that is lacking in 'genuine' appeal to child readers; and/or that is repressive of child readers in its ethical/political values. However, as I have suggested, the contradictions and inconsistencies in critics' discourse – particularly in the use of the concepts listed above as well as in the use of the concept of a 'genuine children's literature' – frequently point to an image of 'the child' at the service of critics.

Some critics have called upon the concepts of 'the implied child reader', 'the child narratee' and 'child culture', for example, to define a 'genuine children's literature' (to determine a literature that is genuinely *for* children) and referred to these concepts as though they were fixed, stable and unproblematic. As I have discussed, however, in drawing upon these same concepts different critics have arrived at diametrically opposing conclusions about what constitutes 'genuine children's literature', not only in regard to Dahl's and Garner's work but also in regard to work by other authors, such as William Mayne.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, as these differences of opinion indicate, concepts like 'the implied child reader' and 'child culture' are constructed in different ways by different critics. This serves to underline the basic inconclusiveness of attempts to define these concepts, or a 'genuine children's literature' based upon these concepts or 'the child reader's response to the text' (in terms of the response of a generalised/idealised child reader), in any absolute sense.

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<sup>52</sup> Wall, for example, states that "Mayne's commitment to children is so intense and so strong, and is borne out so forcibly in all his writing, that it is extraordinary that there can be doubt about his intended audience" (p. 206). Chambers, however, states that "what the tone of [Mayne's] books actually achieves ... is an implied author who is an observer of children ... a watcher rather than an ally", "The Reader in the Book", p. 260.

These concepts of the 'implied child reader', 'child narratee', 'child culture' and 'child subconscious' are frequently used by critics to construct/reinforce an image of 'the real child reader' (and of that reader's 'experience of the text') which in turn is used to construct/reinforce the meaning of a text which in turn is used to construct/reinforce an image of the 'implied child reader', 'child narratee' and so on. I have referred to this circularity of interpretation throughout this chapter but my point has not been to highlight that this makes these interpretative concepts superfluous or, more fundamentally, to suggest that there is *either* final scepticism about such concepts and claims to knowledge about children and their reading responses *or* final certainty about such concepts and such knowledge. Rather, I have sought to emphasise that these concepts are built upon a contested knowledge of children and their reading experiences; that such concepts, once established by a critic, are often employed by that critic in ways that are contradictory and inconsistent; and that the critic's involvement in the construction of these concepts is therefore of particular interest. These are issues that I want to develop further over the course of the next three chapters.

Another assumption that underpins several of the commentaries I have discussed is that if a book has close links with the fairy tale, which in turn suggests that it has a natural link with child readers, these linkages somehow neutralise ethical and political concerns about the book. We can ignore the questionable ethics/politics of Dahl's fairytale-based stories because his work is *of* 'the child'. 'The child', and the fairy tales that 'belong to the child', are somehow innocent of the prejudices of 'adult culture'. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Rose has been particularly critical of such a viewpoint, suggesting that 'the child' is being used here by adults to conceal "the historical divisions [class, race, gender] and difficulties [language, sexuality, violence] of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10). Through such an image of 'the child' and 'children's literature', adults might be able to escape from/evade these divisions and difficulties. Dahl's books are initially regarded as ethically/politically unsound by a number of critics but because his books are specifically addressed *to* 'the child' and/or have close links with the fairytale (and/or appeal to 'child culture', 'the child subconscious' and so on) this seemingly cancels out critics' objections to the books. Critics therefore conclude by suppressing their own interpretation of the text in favour of 'the child reader's (apparent) response'.

A major difficulty also emerges with the privileging of metafictional ('open') texts. Such texts are believed by a number of critics to be not only closer to 'the culture of childhood' (an assumption that, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, appears to underpin Hunt's approach) but also to be more ethically/politically progressive, more liberating in their ethics and politics. There are problems, as I have discussed, with this lumping together of openness and a progressive ethics/politics. A particular set of values is being privileged by such

critics but because their approach is ethically/politically informed these values appear not to be open to the same scrutiny as the values upheld by opposing approaches. It may appear to be liberating to focus on child readers through interpretive constructs such as 'child culture' and 'the implied child reader' but, as this discussion illustrates, these terms may be just as much an imposition on child readers. Such an approach is *not* ethically/politically neutral.

All this serves finally (as Rose has suggested) to underline the availability of 'the child' and 'children's literature' as concepts to buttress different critical arguments and positions. A remark by Tallis reinforces this point (albeit in an inverted sense). Tallis attempts to downgrade metafictional texts by implicating such texts with 'children's literature': "the criteria that place Donald Barthelme on the side of the angels [as favourably assessed] will also put A. A. Milne, Rev. W. Awdrey and a host of other writers of children's books in the forefront of the *avant garde*. Once you start reading anti-realist theory into the practice, you can find it everywhere and in children's literature most of all".<sup>53</sup> Tallis reaches for the concept of 'children's literature' to support his argument that postmodernist theory is not to be taken seriously while Chambers goes to the opposite extreme: "I have often wondered why literary theorists haven't yet realized that the *best* demonstration of almost all they say when they talk about phenomenology or structuralism or deconstruction or any other critical approach can be most clearly and easily demonstrated in children's literature".<sup>54</sup>

This returns then to the question of what might be adults' investment in these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse. The issue that I want to explore in Chapters 4 and 6 is whether contemporary critics (in seeking to address the kind of concerns raised by Rose regarding adults' investment in the child, child literature and child literature criticism, and so arrive at a literature that is more *for* children) have simply reversed a series of hierarchies: 'metafictional' texts are privileged over 'classic realist' texts, a demand for play with language is privileged over a demand for stability of language, a desire for what are perceived to be more progressive (liberating) ethical/political values is privileged over a desire for what are perceived to be more conservative (repressive) ethical/political values, and so on.

If, as Rose has suggested, traditional (book-centred) child literature discourse reveals a desire to use child literature, the critical discourse on that literature, and an image of the (generalised/idealised) child to hold off a threat to the assumption that "language is something which can simply be organised and cohered" (p. 10), shore up certain values (aesthetic, ethical and political) under threat in modern society, escape from the "historical

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<sup>53</sup> *In Defence of Realism*, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> *Booktalk*, p. 133 (emphasis added).

divisions" (class, gender, race) and "difficulties" (language, sexuality, violence) of which "children no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10) and suspend questions about how our identities are implicated in language and sexual difference, then contemporary child literature and contemporary critical discourse on that literature might be used to *similar* ends. If the values inherent in a contemporary (postmodernist?) aesthetic, so to speak, can be allied with the image of the child (in the way that book-centred critics allied a 'classic realist' aesthetic with the child), there is a sense in which these values might be seen as part of our origins, as our 'original', 'true' values. I will develop this discussion over the course of my next three chapters.

### **Contemporary critics' investment in the notion of the 'liberated child reader'**

In concluding, it is my argument (to be explored over the course of the following chapters) that, in their discourse on child literature, contemporary critics have obscured their interest in the child by hiding behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader'<sup>55</sup>. What the critic wants is innocent because it is simply what 'the child' wants. The impression conveyed is that the adult is liberating child readers – that child literature can, by a conscious reduction in the controls acknowledged to be placed on the text by adults (language controls, narrative controls, cultural controls, psychological controls, and ethical/political controls), approach closer to a literature *for* 'the child' (a literature that *genuinely* addresses/appeals to 'the child'). In this way, the critic can again bring 'the child' and certain ethical and political values into close relation without making their interests in 'the child' apparent or having those values questioned. Sanctioned by reference to the 'liberated child reader', these values have become naturalised and rendered innocent. Whatever text is seen to liberate child readers – whether because of its 'postmodernist' use of language, progressive ethics and politics or genuine appeal to 'child culture' ('the implied child reader/the child subconscious') – is regarded as being *for* children with little discussion concerning how critics might know this or what assumptions might lie behind these notions.

In toying with some of the concerns about child literature and its discourse raised by Rose, in their attempt to move towards a 'children's literature' that is more *for* children, I would argue that a number of contemporary critics have therefore neglected or misappropriated a major aspect of Rose's approach. However, while I have difficulties with critics' various conceptions of 'the implied child reader', 'child culture' and so on and, more particularly, with how their claims to knowledge about children and child readers' experiences of texts are derived, at least these critics have sought to *enter into/engage with* the highly problematic areas of child readers' experiences of the book

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<sup>55</sup> A concept that recalls a phrase used by Hunt, see "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", p. 185.

and the reality of children – areas that as I will discuss Rose has shut off from discussion.

### **A 'partial' account of contemporary critical discourse**

Hence, while I have read these contemporary critical commentaries on Dahl and Garner with 'highly suspicious scrutiny' – so again my sub-heading for this chapter, "A 'Partial' Account of Contemporary Critical Discourse"<sup>56</sup> – and pointed to the difficulties involved in critical consideration of the realities of children and child readers' experiences of texts, I would emphasise that such critical consideration is important. Over the chapters that follow, I will further explore these two areas. As a preliminary comment only, while I agree with Rose's basic position that it is impossible to *exactly* gauge child readers' experiences of the book or to *exactly* determine what are children, I would argue that it is important to canvass both these areas. It is also be important (given any apparent contradiction in exploring such areas in the context of my 'highly suspicious' stance in this chapter and at the risk of appearing not to subject my own approach to the same critical scrutiny as I have other approaches) to clarify the theoretical/philosophical assumptions that inform my own critical approach. This is the concern of the following chapters.

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<sup>56</sup> 'Partial' in the sense of being both incomplete (needing Chapters 4 through 6 to broaden the terms of the discussion) and somewhat uncritical (over-sceptical?) of critics' claims.

## Chapter 4

### Contemporary Developments in Critical Theory: Directions, Influences and Assumptions

#### *Opening up Issues about Language and Meaning, Ethics and Politics, and 'the Child' and Children/'the Reader' and Readers?*

Contemporary critical theory of child literature over the period 1977–1997 encompasses a range of different critical approaches. Chapters 4 and 6 turn primarily to the third question set out in my Introduction – to what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform these different approaches – and place this discussion in context by exploring contemporary developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced such discourse. (Chapters 4 and 6 will also briefly revisit the two questions discussed in Chapter 3 in order to further develop the findings of that chapter.) As this topic is an extensive one, Chapter 5 explores a number of contemporary developments in theory and philosophy in detail. This is a pivotal chapter in terms of placing contemporary child critical theory and the work of Rose in a broader context, and in working towards a more critical and comprehensive theoretical approach.

For the purpose of this study, I have divided the major contemporary critics of child literature into four groups. The first group is concerned with reader-response and narrative theories. I will focus here on the work of Chambers and Wall. Chambers draws on early developments in reader-response theory,<sup>1</sup> particularly Iser's conception of 'textual gaps'. (Iser in turn is influenced by the phenomenological approaches of Ingarden and Husserl.) Wall draws upon structuralist narratology and the concept of the 'narratee' derived from the work of Prince.

The second group of critics has been more receptive to developments in what I will broadly term for now as 'poststructuralist' theory. I will focus on the work of two major critics, Hunt (the first British full Professor of English Literature specialising in Child Literature) and Stephens, and on the theories – structuralist (the early work of Culler and Fish) and poststructuralist – by which they have been influenced, noting that reader-response theory remains an important element of these approaches. As this discussion is necessarily lengthy, my commentary on Hunt will be divided over two chapters, with preliminary comments in this chapter and a more detailed critique of his and Stephens' work in Chapter 6 (Stephens' study, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* [1992])

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that there are many reader-response theories, incorporating many different theoretical approaches.

covers similar issues to Hunt's work, although there are important differences between their approaches).

The third group of critics is more concerned with empirical work on children's reading experiences, drawing on a diverse range of fields including education, psychology, and sociology. My discussion on this extensive area in Chapter 6 will be necessarily brief (theories of education, psychology and sociology are beyond the scope of this thesis). I will briefly review the work of Crago, Tucker, Meek and the most recent work of Chambers.

And finally, I will turn to my fourth group of critics, to Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein, by way of concluding Chapter 6. Both critics have engaged in meta-criticism (criticism of the criticism of child literature), which has been the major interest of this thesis, and have been highly critical of the approaches they have discussed. Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein both appear to regard the discipline of 'children's literature criticism' as finally impossible. Lesnik-Oberstein outlines a way of resolving this dilemma but, as I will discuss, she assumes that such resolutions do not already exist within child literature criticism itself.

## SECTION ONE

### Issues in reader-response theories: Chambers

Chambers is highly critical of book-centred critics of child literature who have regarded child readers' experiences of the book as irrelevant to critical practice – "[w]e need a critical method which will take account of the child-as-reader ... What has bedevilled criticism of children's books in the past is the rejection of any concept of the child-reader-in-the-book by those people who have sought most earnestly for critical respectability".<sup>2</sup> He maintains that the concept of "the child-reader-in-the-book" (the implied child reader) offers a critical approach to help determine whether or not a book is genuinely *for* children.

*Child readers need to be drawn into the book*

"The most successful reading", Chambers suggests (quoting Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*) "is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (p. 252): "[r]egardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full" (p. 253). Booth, Chambers observes, expresses something that "mature literary readers" have "always understood",

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<sup>2</sup> "The Reader in the Book", p. 251. Further references will be in the text.



that a "requirement of fulfilled readership is a willingness to give oneself up to the book" (p. 253). However, child readers, Chambers observes, have not learned to do this ("they are unyielding readers") and so child fiction must therefore work even harder to "draw" them into the text (p. 253). Accordingly, he turns to a range of child books to examine some of the techniques by which an author can draw child readers into the text so that "the reader accepts the role offered and enters into the demands of the book" (p. 254). He emphasises, for example, how child literature usually adopts 'a child's point of view': at the centre of the story is a child through whom everything is seen and felt. Children also find within the book "an implied author" whom they can "befriend" because he/she is "of the tribe of childhood". In this way, child readers are "wooed" into the book: the child "adopts the image of the implied child reader and is then willing ... to give himself up to the author and the book and be led through whatever experience is offered" (p. 259). The 'child's point of view' in the book "works powerfully as a solvent, melting away a child's non-literary approach to reading and reforming him into the kind of reader the book demands" (p. 259). Such a stance carries with it a number of highly questionable assumptions.

Stephens and Rose are both critical of such a position. Stephens has challenged Chambers' construction of the implied child reader on ethical/political grounds, arguing that such a concept "distracts attention from the operations of ideology within texts".<sup>3</sup> Chambers' discussion of the function of gaps in narrative comes in for particular criticism here, gaps "'which the reader must fill before the meaning can be complete' [and] which include assumptions of 'beliefs, politics, social customs'" (Stephens, p. 10).<sup>4</sup> Chambers' description of a successful reading, Stephens suggests, therefore envisages "the reader's internalization of the text's implicit ideologies. What Chambers presents as an empowering act of interpretation is just as likely to be a process of subjection" (p. 10). Rose is critical of this same process, particularly of notions such as 'the child's point of view' being employed as a device to draw child readers into the book: "[i]f children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp". The "best book" is that which "secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effects" (p. 2).

Stephens' and Rose's position on this issue is not itself without problems (as I will discuss in Chapter 6), and there is also Booth's point to take into account, as discussed in Chapter 1, that we need to reconsider the claim that identification with characters and stories is always wrong and harmful. Nevertheless, Chambers does appear to take an

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3 *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, p. 10. Further references will be in the text. (I will discuss the problematic term 'ideology' in Chapter 6.)

4 Stephens quotes Chambers, "The Reader in the Book", p. 263 and p. 264.

over-innocent view of such a technique: "[o]nce an author has forged an alliance and a point of view that engages a child, he can then manipulate that alliance as a device to guide the reader towards the meanings he wishes to negotiate" (p. 263).

And yet, as the subsequent contradictions in Chambers' approach indicate, he is to *some extent* aware of possible ethical/political problems with this technique (even though he seeks to shut out such problems from a 'genuine children's literature' and the child readership). He is critical, for example, of the 'child attracting' possibilities of books that adopt a child's point of view when the book in question is a work of *popular fiction* (of interest only to child readers):

[Blyton] quite literally places her second self on the side of the children in her stories and the readers she deliberately looks for. Her allegiance becomes collusion in a game of 'us kids against them adults' (p. 261) ... She is ... the kind of suffocating adult who prefers children never to grow up (p. 262); and

[Dahl] sets up a sense of [an] intimate, yet adult-controlled, relationship between his second self and his implied child reader ... It is, in fact, the tone of a friendly adult storyteller who knows how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place. (p. 256)

This 'child attracting' quality in popular child fiction is clearly regarded as having potentially repressive ethical/political implications. However, when the book in question has been *highly critically acclaimed* (is of interest to both adult and child readers), this 'child attracting' quality is suddenly without these repressive ethical/political implications. Garner's critically acclaimed *The Stone Book*, for example, is praised for trying "to find ways of presenting a fuller picture of adulthood *without losing the child-attracting quality of the narrower focus*" (p. 259, emphasis added). In this way, Chambers suggests, *The Stone Book* provides "a superlative example" of a book that encompasses "a possible readership of about seven years old right on to adulthood" (p. 260). He therefore appears to privilege child texts that are addressed to both an adult and a child audience (such books are regarded somewhat incongruously as 'genuinely for children') and, in a suspension of his previously more critical stance, maintains that the 'child-attracting' quality still very much present in such texts is without repressive ethical/political implications.

Mayne's books, while they are also highly critically acclaimed, therefore fail in Chamber's view as 'genuine children's fiction' because they are of interest to an adult audience alone: "[Mayne is] notoriously little read by children and much read by adults" (p. 260). However, while this appraisal appears to be consistent with the theoretical position Chambers has outlined, it sets up contradictions in terms of other aspects of his theoretical position, namely his preference for metafictional texts. Chambers is particularly critical of the self-conscious/distancing aspect of Mayne's books (an aspect that is frequently highlighted by critics as a characteristic of metafictional texts): Mayne

encourages the reader to "stand back and examine" what he offers, "to disengage" from the story (p. 260). Such self-consciousness, Chambers suggests, is not for child readers: "[Mayne's] technique seems deliberately designed to disengage the reader from the events and from the people described. This attitude to story is ... little to be found in children's books" (p. 260).

Such comments sit uneasily with Chambers' preference for Garner's innovative child fiction, particularly Chambers' discussion of the work readers must do (in filling gaps in the narrative, for example) to achieve a successful reading of Garner's work. There appears to be a very fine line drawn in this regard between Mayne's innovative but inaccessible-to-the-child-reader work and Garner's innovative but accessible-to-the-child-reader work. Chambers is critical of Mayne for leaving a gap, "a fracture between a narrative point of view that seems to want to ally the book with children, while yet containing narrative techniques that require the reader to disassociate from the story" (p. 261). However, somewhat contradictorily, Garner's books are applauded for using a narrative "point of view that shifts between a child-focus and an adult-focus" (p. 259) and for the "vital gaps which the reader must enter and fill before the potential meanings of the book become plain" (p. 265). This suggests a preference for a certain kind of innovative text, a text that is innovative and child-attracting in the way that Chambers wants it to be (therefore underlining my earlier comments about the critic's involvement in the construction of the concept of innovative/'open' texts).

*Attempting to negotiate between (subjective?) reader-responses and (objective?) textual directives*

Chambers (like Iser, by whose theories he was influenced<sup>5</sup>) takes a somewhat paradoxical stance on this issue of narrative gaps/indeterminacies. He observes that when "authors leave gaps which the reader must fill before the meaning can be complete", the reader "becomes a participant in the making of the book" (p. 263). This implies that the text is to be seen as partly a product of readers' interpretive activities. However, in this way, Chambers continues, the author "stage-manages the reader's involvement by bringing into play various techniques which he knows influence the reader's responses" (p. 264). This in turn suggests that readers are seen to be partly responding to textual directives. Chambers therefore appears to waver between the text as a product of readers' interpretive activities and the text as directing readers' realisations of it. This wavering between these positions (if it is perceived as an effort to explore the space in between these positions and if it is not a confused, untheorised wavering) is not so much the problem here as it is that, while Chambers (like Iser) attempts in theory to negotiate between text and reader, in practice he ultimately leans towards one of these positions (in

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5 Chambers quotes Iser on p. 252 and pp. 263-264.

this case towards the text as guiding readers' responses), thus undermining his stated approach.

In writing of the major gap in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (that is, "that the child reader supply the understanding that Max has dreamt his journey to the Wild Things"), for example, Chambers suggests that this gap is "so vital that, unless the reader fills it, the profound meaning of the book cannot be discovered" (p. 265). And yet, how readers will (should) respond to (make meaning of) this gap is already predetermined for Chambers by the text and there is only one ("profound") meaning/one adequate response (that 'Max has dreamt his journey to the Wild Things').<sup>6</sup> Chambers' approach is therefore premised on textual qualities (gaps that guide the reading of the text). This takes us closer to the text (or to the critical reader's appraisal of that text?) than to the (child) reader. However, because of the nature of this opposition (text versus reader/reader versus text), Chambers' position is inevitably drawn back towards the reader pole just as much as it continues to be drawn back towards the text pole – the gaps taken by Chambers as a given in the text can also be seen as supplied by him. In this way, Chambers can be seen as privileging an *ideal* (objective?) reader<sup>7</sup> (based on himself reading as the child reading) rather than empirical readers (child readers and other adult readers). His use of the concept of 'the implied reader' blends into the concept of 'the ideal reader', and "the 'best' reading" occurs, Stephens observes, when real readers are most closely aligned with the "ideological position" of the ideal implied reader (p. 55). In drawing on Iser's work, Chambers appears to be led into many of the same kinds of difficulties that critics have perceived in Iser's approach, particularly concerning Iser's efforts to maintain an interactive theory that acknowledges the contribution of both reader and text but, ultimately, his concession to the text and an ideal reader. And, more broadly, as I will shortly discuss drawing on Bernstein, *both* positions – objectivist/text-centred and subjectivist/reader-centred – can be regarded as subjectivist and reader-centred, and *both* positions can also be regarded as objectivist and text-centred. That critics grappling with this complex area, such as Chambers and Iser, frequently appear to be highly confused and their positions as a result often highly confusing is not therefore surprising.

*The response of 'the ideal reader' = the responses of (child) readers*

As these contradictions in Chambers' discourse demonstrate, he has found it difficult to adhere in practice to the approach he has advocated in theory, that is, an approach that will "take account of the child-as-reader" (p. 251). His approach in practice is clearly founded upon the concept of the implied child reader (the child reader in the book), itself

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6 I owe this example to Stephens (p. 66). Chambers also appears here to have a contradictory stance on language and meaning, wavering between privileging plural meanings and one true meaning but finally leaning towards one true meaning.

7 A "reader who will best actualize a book's potential meanings" (Stephens, p. 55).

founded upon the concept of an ideal (child?) reader (an idealised/generalised image of the reader) – with this concept in turn arguably based upon himself (an adult reader/critic) reading as the child reading rather than on actual child readers. "There is a constant squabble", Chambers observes, "about whether particular books are children's books or not" (p. 250). "We need a critical method which will take account of the *child-as-reader*; which will include rather than exclude him; which will help us to understand a book better and to discover the reader it seeks". "We need a critical method", he continues, however, "which will tell us about the *reader in the book*" (p. 251, emphasis added). As these statements suggest, Chambers quickly slips from seeking to gain an understanding of 'the child-as-reader' (to including actual child readers in his critical process) to gaining an understanding of 'the child reader in the book'. As I have argued, the child reader implied in the book does not automatically take account of actual child readers – the implied child reader is a textual construct constituted in various ways by various critics. "[T]he work itself", Chambers states, "implies the kind of reader to whom it is addressed" (p. 258) but clearly, as critics'/readers' differences of opinion indicate (as I discussed in the previous chapter), this is not the case.

Chambers presumes that his concept of the implied child reader, by virtue of the use of the word *child*, carries with it something of (and can say something about) the reality of children outside of the book. This is necessary so that Chambers can define a 'genuine children's literature': "the concept of the implied child reader ... is a method which could help us determine whether a book is for children or not" (p. 266). Chambers therefore appears to elide the difference between actual child readers and the implied child reader (between child readers outside and inside the book) and relies upon a stable, determinate and unproblematic concept of 'the child' to call up the child reader in the book.

**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by Chambers? What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?**

This discussion has briefly returned to consider the first question outlined in my Introduction. Similar themes have emerged to those discussed in the previous chapter. The idea that child readers need to be drawn into the book is viewed as being without ethical/political implications (unless it is a work of popular fiction) hence there is the same move towards a neutral ethical/political position. There are also similar problems with the way Chambers employs the concept of 'the implied/ideal child reader'. More broadly, however (something not fully developed in the previous chapter), I have discussed Chambers' (not unsurprising) failure to maintain in practice an interactive theory that acknowledges the highly problematic oppositions of (subjective?) object and the (objective?) subject. The questions these themes raise again lead me into my second question: to what might be the adult's investment in these privileged images of the child

and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse?

Chambers has found it extremely difficult to adhere in practice to the critical framework he has constructed in theory. Clearly he does have an interest in child readers and in liberating those readers from a literature that is apparently not addressed to them but these interests are constantly called into question by the contradictions in his discourse. This reinforces my argument, as outlined in the previous chapter, that Chambers has an investment in the concept of the 'liberated child reader' and hides behind this concept in order to suppress important epistemological and ethical/political questions raised by his approach. To further develop my discussion, I now want to turn to the central question of this chapter: to what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform Chambers' reader-response theory and the broader developments in criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced his approach? (I will conclude the discussion on my second question in Chapter 6, following my commentaries on Wall, Hunt and Stephens.)

I have already hinted at some theoretical/philosophical concerns with Chambers' reader-response theory, particularly in terms of the problematic opposition between the subject and object that underpins his approach. To develop my argument and place my discussion on Chambers' reader-response theory in a broader context, I will now turn to the work of Iser and the phenomenological theories of Ingarden and Husserl. In this way too, I will seek to work towards a more comprehensive and critical appreciation/understanding of reader-response theories and phenomenology, as well as of the theories of Iser, Ingarden and Husserl.

### **Developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced reader-response theories**

*Iser and Ingarden: attempts to construct an interactive theory that acknowledges the contribution of readers and texts*

Iser<sup>8</sup> maintains that the "convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence", although "this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed"<sup>9</sup> – meaning is

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<sup>8</sup> There is not sufficient scope in this thesis to go into Iser's work in detail. For a detailed study of his work sited within its origins in German reception theory, see Robert C. Holub, *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1992), particularly pp. 22-36. See also Freund, "The Peripatetic Reader: Wolfgang Iser and the Aesthetics of Reception", *The Return of the Reader*, pp. 143-151. Chambers (see p. 252) draws upon Iser's *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1974). Other works by Iser of relevance to this discussion include, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); "Interaction between Text and Reader", in *The Reader in the Text*, eds. Suleiman and Crosman, pp. 106-119; and "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction", *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp 3-30.

<sup>9</sup> *The Implied Reader*, p. 275. Further references will be in the text.

generated during the reading process and is neither purely textual nor constructed solely by readers. Readers participate in the creation of the work by filling in the gaps (areas of indeterminacy) in an already given textual structure: "the 'unwritten' part of a text stimulates the reader's creative participation" (p. 275). The interpretations that arise from this creative activity are regarded as evidence of the "inexhaustibility of the text" (p. 280), that there is no single or correct interpretation/meaning.

A number of critics have argued that Iser's approach is theoretically unsustainable and ultimately philosophically unsound. Leaving aside these broader philosophical concerns for the moment, critics maintain that Iser's theory of reading as an interactive convergence of reader and text divides interpretive authority between two highly unstable centres: "[t]he imbalance between text and reader", Iser states, "is undefined, and it is this very indeterminacy that increases the variety of communication possible".<sup>10</sup> Freund, for example, claims that Iser manages to "straddle two sides of a fence, one text-centred and hypothetical, the other reader-centred and empirical".<sup>11</sup> Iser's theory involves, on the one hand, an analysis of the text in terms of its 'gaps' ('indeterminacies') and, on the other hand, conjectures about how readers actualise the text. Ultimately, however, the charge is that Iser is unable to maintain this interactive stance, with this tension in his work being finally resolved in favour of the text.

Suleiman therefore argues that, while "Iser asserts the primacy of the reader's creative role in realizing the text, thus allowing for a high degree of 'free' variations", ultimately it is "the text itself which directs the reader's realization of it"<sup>12</sup>, and there are "some realizations more correct, more true to the intentions of the text, than others" (p. 24). She quotes, by way of example, Iser's comments on Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*:

[t]he esthetic effect of *Vanity Fair* depends upon activating the reader's critical faculties so that he may recognize the social reality of the novel as a confusing array of sham attitudes, and experience the exposure of this sham as the true reality. Instead of being expressly stated, the criteria for such judgments have to be inferred. They are the blanks which the reader is supposed to fill in, thus bringing his own criticism to bear.<sup>13</sup>

Suleiman points here to the "notion of 'inference', as well as the clear formulation of the conclusion that the inference 'is supposed' to lead to" (p. 24). How readers will (should) respond to (make meaning) of this gap in the text is already predetermined by the text and there is only one meaning/one adequate response (the recognition of "the social reality of the novel as a confusing array of sham attitudes").<sup>14</sup> (This recalls Chambers' stance and

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10 "Interaction between Text and Reader", p. 110.

11 *The Return of the Reader*, p. 143. Further references will be in the text.

12 "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism", p. 23. Further references will be in the text.

13 Suleiman quotes Iser, *The Implied Reader*, pp. 112-113.

14 Iser's position here (as with Chambers') also sits uneasily with his privileging of so-called

his comments on Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, as discussed earlier.) As Suleiman observes, ultimately "the weight of numerous statements" suggest that readers' filling in of these gaps is "'programmed' by the text itself" (p. 25).<sup>15</sup>

Culler maintains that Iser, in seeking to determine what is 'in' the text and what is 'supplied' by the reader, is (like many other reader-oriented critics) caught up in the dilemma of the subject-object dichotomy. Iser responds with an interactive theory that credits the contribution of both text and reader but Culler argues that this theory eventually gives way and one or the other pole supplies everything: "Iser's mistake is to take the dualism necessary to stories of reading as theoretically sound, not realizing that the variable distinction between ... text's contribution and reader's contribution will break down under theoretical scrutiny".<sup>16</sup> The subject/object dichotomy finally disintegrates into favouring either a problematic subjectivism or an equally problematic objectivism, such as Iser is finally perceived to be advocating. Iser maintains that his model avoids identification solely with the objective text or the subjective reader – "the literary work has two poles ... the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two".<sup>17</sup> – but clearly a number of critics remain unconvinced.

Finally, to turn to the broader philosophical concerns with Iser's and Ingarden's approach, Freund claims that a more fundamental underlying problem in the phenomenological theories of Ingarden<sup>18</sup> (Iser's work has its philosophical underpinning

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'indeterminate' or 'open' texts, such as those by Joyce and Beckett: "[t]exts with minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious", "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction", p. 10.

15 Tompkins takes a similar view, observing that while Iser accepts the reader's interpretive activity he does not grant the reader autonomy from textual constraints: "[t]he reader's activity is only a fulfilment of what is already implicit in the structure of the work – though exactly how that structure limits his activity is never made clear", "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", p. xv.

16 *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 75-76. (Further references will be in the text.) It is important to emphasise that Culler's statements here themselves need to be viewed against a broader theoretical/philosophical background – I will defer comment, however, until I discuss his work in the context of Hunt's approach later in this chapter.

17 Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 21.

18 In Ingarden's work (see *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973], and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. R. A. Crowley and K. R. Olson [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973]), reading is regarded as a process of 'concretisation' whereby the reader fills in points of indeterminacies or gaps in the text. Although guided in this activity by the text, the reader also draws on his/her own skills and creativity (the text is now regarded as a product of the reader's consciousness). And yet, while there may be many different concretisations of the same work, these are not fully subject to the reader – the text sets limits to allowable completion (the reader is now guided by the text). For a detailed study of Ingarden's work, see *On the Aesthetics of Roman Ingarden: Interpretations and Assessments*, eds. B. Dziemidok and P. McCormick (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989) and various



in the theories of Ingarden, the philosophical influence behind Ingarden in turn being Husserl) inevitably flows through to Iser's approach: "[t]he entire system ... depends on the double identity of the literary work's objective status and its subjective realization in the reading process. But what remains unclear is why perception of the objective structure is immune to infinite indeterminacy, and is not itself a concretization" (p. 141).<sup>19</sup> Freund suggests that Ingarden's double emphasis on the objective existence of the text (the text does not depend entirely on a subject for its existence) and the subjective realisation of the text (the text does not have a full existence without the participation of human consciousness) is ultimately unclear and unconvincing because that initial *subjective realisation* (consciousness/perception of the objective structure of the text and gaps in the text that guide the readers' responses) is not *itself* open to questioning and is regarded as just one concretisation among others.<sup>20</sup> Freund's criticism extends to the entire phenomenological project:

[a]ccording to phenomenological accounts, all consciousness is consciousness of something. Although we cannot be certain of the independent 'objective' existence of things, we can be certain of their presence as things intended by consciousness. Intentionality here ... denotes the structure of an act by which the subject imagines or conceptualizes, or is conscious of an object, thereby bringing the object into being; but the intuition of the object simultaneously constitutes the subject as a

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essays published in *Ingardeniana II: New Studies in the Philosophy of Roman Ingarden*, ed. Hans H. Rudnick (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990) and *Ingardeniana III: Roman Ingarden's Aesthetics in a New Key*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 1991).

19 Fish has questioned Iser's project on similar epistemological grounds: see Fish, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser", *Diacritics*, 11 (1981), pp. 2-13 and Iser's response to Fish, "Talk Like Whales", *Diacritics*, 11 (1981), pp. 82-87. Fish argues that "perception is never innocent of assumptions, and the assumptions within which it occurs will be responsible for the contours of what is perceived" (p. 8; quoted in Freund, p. 149). What we see or understand is always already informed by a prior perspective that enables that seeing and understanding. Fish therefore calls into question Iser's concept of narrative gaps. Where Iser regarded these gaps as objectively there in the text (as a given independent of the reader), Fish argues that they do not exist before a prior act of interpretation. Fish's claim that there are no determinate objects for interpretation but only interpreted objects that are wrongly called determinate might suggest that Fish supports a (reader-centred) subjective indeterminacy. However, as I will discuss, while he did support such a position in his early work, in his later work, he turns instead to the concept of 'interpretive communities' and argues that we have no access to a free subjectivity unconstrained by conventions. Fish does not suggest that an analysis of a text is impossible drawing on Iser's approach but rather argues that such an analysis is itself the outcome of a specific interpretive strategy which has authority only within a specific community of understanding. There are difficulties with Fish's approach, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

20 See also Holub on this point, "Ingarden's theory of the literary work of art and its realization by the reader is at its most vulnerable in its inadvertent recourse to determinacy ... even if we agree with Ingarden that concretions of a given work differ from reader to reader and even from one reading to the next, there is no reason for us to think that absolute agreement is possible with regard to the structures that permit and condition these concretions. Although we might concur that some stable structure exists ... it does not follow that this structure is immune to the same types of contingencies that affect concretization", "Phenomenology", in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 8, From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Raman Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 301-302. Holub also comments that Ingarden's notion of "adequate and inadequate concretization" ultimately privileges the text (by highlighting certain concretisations that are "closer to the work" than others [p. 302]) which undermines his interactive theory.

vessel of consciousness. The subject is thus (in intending the object) paradoxically the origin of all meaning but is also the effect of consciousness (p. 137).

To better understand Freund's comments here (and the development of alternative philosophical/theoretical positions to be discussed later), it is important to outline, albeit briefly, the phenomenological position identified with Husserl.

*Husserl and phenomenology: the problematic opposition between the (objective?) subject and the (subjective?) object*

Husserl is a key figure in the lines of development in contemporary theory that I am tracing in this thesis,<sup>21</sup> and an important influence on figures such as Heidegger and Derrida.

Husserl's concept of 'pure phenomenology' refers to how human consciousness constitutes meaning/reality (consciousness is consciousness *of something*) through pre-reflective acts of perception, how things themselves first become apparent to us prior to theoretical interpretation. Husserl set out to systematically investigate consciousness/mental phenomena (as a fundamental undeniable existent) by (somewhat impossibly) bracketing all theoretical assumptions and empirical presuppositions about the external causes and consequences of those phenomena. While acknowledging that it is not possible to obtain a knowledge of the world that is untouched by our perception of that world, Husserl therefore sought to build up a more accurate understanding of the objects of consciousness by bracketing certain elements in our perception of them. This 'pure description' prior to theorising was held to be distinct from psychological description and empiricism: "phenomenology aims to demonstrate how the world is an *experience which we live* before it becomes an *object which we know* in some impersonal or detached fashion".<sup>22</sup> (Science only credits as real/as fact that which is physically given and psychology treats consciousness as a fact among facts, but these 'facts' are a phenomena of the consciousness that intends them.)

Phenomenology therefore seeks to move the main point of contact between human beings and the world away from the usual separation of our experience into the opposite poles of

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion on Husserl, see *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, eds. Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy: Phenomenology, Critical Theory and Structuralism*, 2nd ed (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Richard Cobb-Stevens, "The Beginnings of Phenomenology: Husserl and his Predecessors", in *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, ed. Kearney (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 5-37; Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993); and David Bell, *Husserl* (Routledge: London, 1991). (See also Derrida on Husserl, as discussed later in this chapter.)

<sup>22</sup> Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, p. 13.

subject and object and to a midpoint between these two poles. Subject and object become inseparable – a characteristic of mental phenomena is that they include an object *intentionally* within themselves (every object is to be interpreted as it is grasped by an act of comprehension in consciousness): "[p]henomenology rests upon the radical conviction that meaning is neither in the mind alone, nor in the world alone, but in the intentional relationship between the two".<sup>23</sup>

It is on the question (stated somewhat reductively) of whether Husserl upholds either an idealist (transcendental) metaphysics where the world is dependent upon consciousness (although not taking issue with the common sense view that material things exist) and a presuppositionless epistemology (because one cannot turn to knowledge claims about an external world) or a realism where the world is independent of consciousness that represents an substantial area of controversy concerning his work. Smith and Woodruff Smith conclude their introduction on Husserl by pointing to these "competing extrapolations" of his views.<sup>24</sup> In an (albeit reductionist) sense, it appears from these critics' careful and considered reading of his work that the tension in Husserl's philosophy between the subject (in the form of subjective idealism<sup>25</sup>) and the object is something that he, like Iser, is finally unable to maintain with it being resolved in his early work in favour of realism and in his later work in favour of an idealist metaphysics (generally regarded as untenable by later critics). Herman Philipse concludes that rather than rejecting the traditional dilemma of subjectivism and objectivism, "Husserl accepts the dilemma and acclaims subjectivism".<sup>26</sup> Bernstein takes a similar view, as I will now discuss.

In using the term 'subjectivism' here, it is important to clarify what one means by such a

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23 Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, p. 15. What is present in our consciousness, as Holub suggests, "is not the object itself or representation of the object, but the experience of the intentional act", "Phenomenology", p. 291.

24 "Introduction", *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, eds. Smith and Woodruff Smith, p. 37.

25 It was this position, Herman Philipse suggests, that Husserl sought (unsuccessfully) to resist through his transcendental idealism, in maintaining that consciousness was an absolute existing independently of nature – that "consciousness which constitutes the world is not part of the world", "Transcendental idealism", in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, eds. Smith and Woodruff Smith, p. 280. Husserl earlier assumed that consciousness was part of the world but this position became entangled in the paradox of human subjectivity: that "constituting consciousness both depends upon physical nature and is a sufficient condition for the existence of nature" (Phlipse, p. 279).

26 "Transcendental Idealism", p. 302. Similarly, Catherine Zuckart observes that, "the phenomenon of consciousness" presupposes a fundamental link between the "conscious or thinking 'subject' and the perceived 'object'", and that to discover the nature and foundations of our knowledge, it would "be necessary to investigate the character of this original connection". However, she continues, "because Husserl 'bracketed' the question of the existence of the phenomena in the world in order to avoid the 'naturalistic fallacy' of the empirical sciences, which took their subject matter as simply 'given', he never actually got back 'to the things themselves'. His phenomenology remained almost entirely within the realm of consciousness", *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 35.

term (as well as by the term 'relativism') and to open up for discussion the conventional perception of the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism. Bernstein makes a crucial point when he highlights the "dialectical similarity" between the objectivism Husserl attacks and the transcendental subjectivism he defends: "both share the aspiration to discover the real, permanent foundation of philosophy and knowledge – a foundation that will withstand historical vicissitudes, escape from 'anthropologicistic relativism,' and satisfy the craving for ultimate constraints".<sup>27</sup> In using the term 'objectivism' to characterise both what Husserl calls objectivism and (subjective) transcendentalism, Bernstein admits that he is using the term "in a way that is far more inclusive than some of its standard uses" (p. 9):

[b]y 'objectivism', I mean the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness (p. 8) ... 'Objectivism' has frequently been used to designate metaphysical realism – the claim that there is world of objective reality that exists independently of us and that has a determinate nature or essence that we can know. In modern times objectivism has been closely linked with an acceptance of a basic metaphysical or epistemological distinction between the subject and the object. What is 'out there' (objective) is presumed to be independent of us (subjects), and knowledge is achieved when a subject correctly mirrors or represents objective reality. This dominant form of objectivism is only one variety of the species. (p. 9)

While Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, for example, as Bernstein points out, can be read as questioning the possibility of "making sense of the objectivity of knowledge by resorting to metaphysical realism – by appealing to a world or thing-in-itself that is completely independent of the ways in which we condition and constitute experience", Kant is "no less an objectivist and foundationalist than the empiricists and the rationalists he was criticizing" (p. 10). Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* attempts to ground the possibility of certainty in a conception of the human subject as a detached knower of objects, and in doing so emphasises the timeless, transcultural characteristics of human subjectivity that make absolutely certain (objective) knowledge possible.

Following Heidegger, whose work I will briefly discuss in concluding this chapter, Bernstein "questions the *whole mode of thinking whereby we take the 'subjective' and the 'objective' as signifying a basic epistemological or metaphysical distinction*" (p. 12, emphasis added). In this way, Bernstein points to objectivism and relativism, rather than objectivism and subjectivism, as being "the central cultural oppositions of our time" (p. 7).<sup>28</sup> Subjectivism, used in its everyday sense to refer to whatever is merely a matter of personal taste and therefore idiosyncratic, is somewhat misleading if used in this sense in terms of theory, as this discussion of Husserl's and Kant's work demonstrates. Both

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<sup>27</sup> *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 11. Further references will be in the text.

<sup>28</sup> The opposition between objectivism and relativism (defined by Bernstein as that "seductive Either/Or" [p. 18]) is the opposition that, like Bernstein and other commentators, I have sought to open up and question in this thesis.

are subjectivist in maintaining that there are structures of transcendental subjectivity that ground our knowledge but both are also objectivist in maintaining that these are *a priori* structures of transcendental subjectivity that can be known beyond doubt and that ground our objective knowledge. Relativism, on the other hand, as Bernstein defines it:

is the basic conviction that when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental – whether it is the concept of rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms – we are forced to recognize that in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture. (p. 8)

I will further consider Bernstein's position in the following chapter.

**What merits questioning in the assumptions that inform reader-response and phenomenological developments in critical theory (both child critical theory and critical theory in general): opening up issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers?**

To return then to my third question,<sup>29</sup> I would argue that Chambers, Iser, Ingarden and Husserl have tended to *open up* issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers by focusing on the reader-subject and raising questions about the nature of interpretive authority. However, just as some 'poststructuralist' theories were perceived to have opened up critical dialogue but have recently been challenged on this front (in terms of their *endlessly* opening up questions about language and meaning while, at the same time, shutting out voices that seek to make meaning and use language by placing 'limits' on the 'infinite plurality of meaning' and 'endless play of language'), so too have reader-response and phenomenological theories been perceived as opening up some issues while closing down others.

Chambers and Iser have tended to open up issues about (child) readers and their responses to texts. Chambers, in focusing on the various images of the child reader constructed in/implicit by various primary texts (different ways of talking to child readers) has opened up an important area of discussion that had been previously ignored, particularly by book-centred critics. It is moving on from this point, however, that becomes problematic, that is, with how Chambers relates these images of the child reader to the question of actual child readers reading, raising issues in empirical research as well as broader epistemological issues about the concepts of 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. On a broader front, Iser's and more particularly Husserl's attempt at an interactive/phenomenological theory opens up several possibilities for later development by poststructuralists. Husserlian phenomenology points to the importance of

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29 My conclusions here are somewhat preliminary until I have discussed Hunt's and Stephens' 'poststructuralist-inclined' approaches (poststructuralist theory being itself a critique of phenomenology) and some of the other reader-oriented approaches to child literature.

not taking the objective status of reality and so-called neutral facts for granted (Husserl's analysis focused not just on the objects of consciousness but also on the acts of consciousness such as perception, imagination and signification/language) and opens up meaning from empirical actualities. It also stresses the need to put one's own subjective presuppositions into question. As Bernstein observes, even a philosopher like Husserl, "who claims to have discovered an entirely new science and believes that we can achieve apodictic [absolutely certain] knowledge of the structure of transcendental subjectivity", emphasises the ways in which "transcendental phenomenology is open, dynamic, cooperative, and fallible" (p. 12). Further, in seeking *unsuccessfully*, in many critics' opinion, to secure a pure intuition of human consciousness beyond all presuppositions of language, culture or history<sup>30</sup> (a transcendental experience of consciousness capable of producing universally valid, presupposition-free knowledge), Husserl by default called into question the notion of the 'metaphysics of presence' (the belief in an extra-systemic validating presence, subject, consciousness, origin, centre of authority that fixes meaning but is itself beyond scrutiny).<sup>31</sup> Husserl's phenomenological approach as it washes into the work of Ingarden, Iser and Chambers – and as it represents a challenge to the work of the New Critics, Leavis and the book-centred critics – therefore starts to open up dialogue about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the reader' and readers, by raising fundamental issues concerning interpretive authority and the plural nature of response even while arguably seeking at the same time to suppress such issues.

Chambers' model of reader-response theory, like Iser's and Ingarden's phenomenological approach, is therefore highly problematic in terms of the subject-object opposition between which it attempts to navigate. As with the New Critics and book-centred critics discussed in Chapter 2, these critics' alternative attempts to deal with the opposition of reader versus text/text versus reader and subject versus object/object versus subject ultimately leads to a similar *unravelling* and *exchange* of positions. As Freund stated of the New Criticism, "notwithstanding theoretical manifestos to the contrary, an overwhelming but suppressed or rarely acknowledged concern with the reader was at the heart of the New Critical project" (pp. 41-42), so too, despite theoretical manifestos to the contrary, does an overwhelming but suppressed concern with the text lie at the heart of the reader-response project.

Chambers, like Iser, attempts in theory to negotiate between the text as a product of the reader's interpretive activities and the text as directing the reader's realisation of it but in

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30 A dissenting view is that of Kearney, who suggests that in his later work, "Husserl came increasingly to recognise that the transcendental subject's world of immediate experience was in fact grounded in the historicity of a cultural life-world rather than grounding it", *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, p. 115.

31 See, for example, Heidegger's and Derrida's post-phenomenological positions, as discussed later in this chapter, as critiques of Husserl's position.

practice he is unable to maintain this position and ends up favouring a highly problematic objectivism (in the form of the textual object and the ideal reader). While Chambers clearly has an interest in empirical readers, his work is untheorised on this point. It is not apparent from where he is drawing his information or how he has moved from an analysis of the implied child reader in the book to his assessment that a given text is or is not *for* child readers outside of the book. As I have discussed, this suggests that Chambers' 'implied child reader' is an ideal reader, a reader that he has constructed and to whom he can reliably appeal. Similarly, in Iser's work, it is qualities of the text (gaps/indeterminacies) that stimulate readers' responses, and the actualisation of meaning in his theory is performed not by empirical readers but by an ideal reader.

To sum up, Chambers and Iser have tended to open up some issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and readers but they have also suppressed/closed down other important issues concerning these areas that would undermine/problematised aspects of their approach.

## SECTION TWO

### Issues in structuralist narratology: Wall

[T]he problem of language appeared and it was clear that phenomenology was no match for structural analysis in accounting for the effects of meaning that could be produced by a structure of the linguistic type, in which the subject (in the phenomenological sense) did not intervene to confer meaning.<sup>32</sup>

Wall's *The Voice of the Narrator* (1991) is illustrative of a structuralist approach to child literature. I will not examine her work at length as it engages only briefly with theoretical concerns (as I will comment, her few statements regarding her theoretical approach are highly contradictory). Wall's work has also been discussed in some detail by a recent critic.<sup>33</sup>

*Structuralist narratological theory makes possible the precise determination of a 'genuine children's book' and (apparently) excludes ethical/political critique*

In mapping out her approach, Wall clearly starts out from the assumption that some works of what have commonly been called 'children's literature' are not in fact *for* children and that adult and child narratees (the adults and the children narrated in the book) have been constructed in a variety of ways. She therefore appears to recognise that

32 Michel Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History", in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 112-113.

33 See Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, pp. 143-148. Lesnik-Oberstein also undertakes a critique of Hunt's work, as well as of Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan*, although not to the same level of analysis that I have undertaken in this thesis. I will have more to say about her approach later.

the concepts of 'children's literature' and 'the child/adult addressed in the book' are contested concepts. However, in engaging with these contested concepts (questioning the meaning of these terms), Wall assumes that her own theoretical approach renders them unproblematic. She stops short at an interrogation of the apparently meaningful structures she herself has created. In this context, it is useful to consider a number of Wall's statements:

using insights into varieties of narrative address which recent developments in narratology have made possible, I will propose a method of deciding whether or not a book is a children's book (p. 1);

[i]f a story is written *to* children, then it is *for* children (p. 2); and

the theory of narratology has provided a new set of terms for the criticism of fiction and has made possible the precise and methodical examination of ... the relationship between the narrator and narratee, a relationship which is of fundamental importance in identifying fiction for children (p. 3).

As these statements indicate, Wall adopts a narratological approach that she believes can "decide" whether or not a book is *for* children. That narratology (its terms and assumptions) and the aim to which she applies such theory (relying upon concepts of the 'child' and 'adult') are not so straightforward appear to be overlooked ("the theory of narratology ... has made possible the *precise* and *methodical* examination of an aspect of fiction"). A major difficulty with Wall's approach is therefore her non-engagement with the charge that the theory of narratology (like any theory) is not unproblematic. As Wallace Martin points out, to acknowledge that narratology can "generate paradoxes" and to "discover fallacies in its assumptions", should be "considered a worthwhile activity in that it prevents us from being held captive by a theory of narrative meaning that we know is, in some sense, inadequate".<sup>34</sup> Wall does not engage with the broader epistemological questions raised by her approach.

The diversity of interpretations that result from the application of narrative theory highlight that Wall's 'decisive' claims are claims amongst other claims. Stephens, for example (although writing later than Wall and from a more strongly poststructuralist stance), also draws on the theory of narratology and employs the concept of the narratee but, based on this approach, reaches different conclusions from Wall about the same works of child literature.<sup>35</sup> The two critics' diametrically opposed comments on child literature author E. Nesbit provide a good illustration of this. Stephens points to a presupposition about childhood "as a period of helplessness, ignorance, and incompetence" that pervades Nesbit's books and highlights how she invites the child narratee to share a joke "which in the end is at the narratee's expense" (p. 130). In

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<sup>34</sup> *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 188.

<sup>35</sup> Stephens' work is more interesting in that, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, he engages with some of the broader epistemological questions raised by his own approach.



contrast, Wall states that the narrator in Nesbit's stories "takes it for granted that children ... are intelligent, independent beings, capable of ... acting on their own initiative" (p. 154) and concludes that "the quest to find a suitable voice in which to narrate to children ended here, in Nesbit's attitude to her narratees ... She began a true literature for children" (p. 157).

Wall's approach also raises ethical and political concerns.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Wall is not uninterested in ethical/political issues: "in true fiction for children these voices will be seen to take children seriously, to care deeply for them, and to speak expressly to them: along these lines indeed might writing for children be defined" (p. 272). This statement suggests that not only is Wall concerned with the direction of the narrating voice but also with the appropriateness/tone of that narrating voice. Wall in fact confirms this in her concluding statement to *The Narrator's Voice*: [t]he task of the adult evaluator is to determine the tone, quality and direction of the narrating voice, and its appropriateness" (p. 274). A number of problems arise here, however. Wall had appeared in the introduction to her book to be critical of a 'traditional criticism' of child literature that centred on what was appropriate/suitable for children: "[t]raditionally, defining books as children's books has focused on ... what has been considered likely ... to be suitable for [children]" (p. 3). She follows this statement with the suggestion that such criticism is, unlike narratology, neither "precise" nor "methodical" and emphasises the need for a "new set of terms" (p. 3). Such statements call into question her later acknowledgment of the critical validity of ethical/political critique and her own reference to ethical/political concerns.

While Lesnik-Oberstein's critique of Wall's work does not take in this ethical/political dimension it does point to similar difficulties concerning Wall's presuppositions about 'the adult' and 'the child'.<sup>37</sup> She suggests that, although Wall appears to be "aware of

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36 Shavit's structuralist semiotics approach to child literature raises similar concerns. She states that a "conceptual change in the understanding of children's literature, requires the total exclusion of normative or ideological questions" – such questions are "traditional and overworn", *Poetics of Children's Literature*, p. x. Her interest is in the "universal structural traits and patterns common to all children's literatures" (p. xi). As Rose suggests, while a poetics of child literature develops an "understanding of the internal features of children's books", it also reinforces the idea of child literature as "something self-contained" (p. 143), as somehow separate from ethical/political concerns. See reviews of Shavit's work by Hugh T. Keenan, "Adults and Children", *Children's Literature*, 17 (1989), p. 151; Huse, "Poetry, Poetics, and Pedagogy", pp. 121-128; and Nodelman, "Signs of Confusion", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1986-87), pp. 162-164. I have not discussed Shavit's work, agreeing with these critics that her approach is reductionist in its assumptions. Huse, for example, questions Shavit's reliance on the theories of childhood of Ariés in the face of counter theories about children's language capacities and social history (p. 122). Huse also suggests that Shavit portrays child readers as passive recipients of the text, ignores "historical and cultural differences" (p. 125) and posits an "undifferentiated 'child'" (p. 127).

37 Lesnik-Oberstein questions, for example, Wall's assumption that "'adults' use different pitches and tones when addressing 'children' [and] that these 'almost indefinable adjustments in pitch and tone' translate into written language, and can be recognized, if not defined, in writing", *Children's*

theories relating to constructions of identity and definition", she fails to apply "the 'construction' concept" to the 'real child reader': "[s]he admits the constructed nature of the 'child' *in* the text, but always maintains the 'real' child" (p. 145). Lesnik-Oberstein has a good point – Wall admits that the adult is in "profound ignorance" (p. 89) about real children but she then goes on to talk about children's needs and characteristics as though these were straightforward: "[m]any child readers respond favourably to the sense of security given to them by the familiar voice of the explaining, rather patronising, narrator" (p. 18). Lesnik-Oberstein concludes that "Wall is tangled up in the assumption of knowledge of the 'real' child" (p. 146) – however Lesnik-Oberstein herself appears to be tangled up in this assumption. It is important to clarify my point here before continuing my discussion on Wall's work.

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For all that I agree with some of Lesnik-Oberstein's comments on Wall's position (as well as with some of her remarks on Hunt and Rose), and believe her work to be an important study, I have a number of problems with her approach, as I will further discuss in Chapter 6. Her argument, for example, that the removal of the "real child" causes the "collapse" of child literature criticism (p. 158) implies that such criticism stands or falls upon finally and definitively capturing the 'real child'. Not only does Lesnik-Oberstein (building on Rose's "impossibility of children's fiction" argument) push *all* critics undertaking criticism of child literature into the extreme position of seeking to define/know 'the child' finally and definitively, but she arguably herself adopts a position at the opposite extreme. She is unable to conceive of a *child literature criticism* founded upon what is openly and self-consciously acknowledged to be contested concepts of the 'child' and children. Instead, all child literature criticism (like the literature itself) is "useless" (p. 163), "impossible" (p. 164) and needs to be "left behind" (p. 168). Like Rose, Lesnik-Oberstein therefore misses an opportunity to engage with and open up the discourse. She speaks approvingly of Rose "clos[ing] down the field of children's fiction and therefore, by implication, children's literature criticism" (p. 159) and instead privileges the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy and their concept of 'the child'.

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Wall is clearly concerned with actual child readers, although her rhetoric is occasionally contradictory on this point: "[I am] confining my attention to what takes place within the pages of a text" (p. 89). In her introduction, for example, she made an explicit

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*Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, p. 144 (Lesnik-Oberstein quotes Wall, pp. 2-3). Further references will be in the text.

commitment to a six-term model that includes real readers.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, she is clearly not just interested in analysing the various definitions of the 'children's book' and images of 'the child' implied by the various constructions of the child narratee across the genre. In seeking to define a 'genuine children's literature', she must also be interested in the relationship between these definitions/images and actual child readers.

Wall's approach is then not so much "tangled up in the assumption of knowledge of the 'real' child", as Lesnik-Oberstein would have it, as tangled up in the assumption (as is Lesnik-Oberstein) that it is not possible to discuss children, to deal with such a contested area, without shifting to a position that *either* one cannot say anything at all *or* one can say everything unproblematically and definitively. The concept of real children (and real child readers) is an important one with which child literature critics need to engage although Wall, like Chambers, unfortunately engages with this concept in a contradictory and confused way.

This is not to claim that an analysis of a text using Wall's model is not possible. As Wall's work demonstrates, an interpretation of child literature can be performed drawing on such concepts as the child narratee to offer up new descriptions of old works. However, the results of that analysis are not as unproblematic as Wall appears to suggest. Fish has commented, for example, that concepts such as these are themselves the consequence of a particular interpretive strategy, that they possess validity only inside of a particular system of intelligibility. (However, Fish's comments, as I will shortly discuss, also raise questions.)

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In the context of Fish's approach, concepts such as 'the child narratee' and 'genuine children's literature' could be viewed as constructs used by critics as a determinate 'given' to halt the indeterminacy of the interpretive enterprise. It is how critics respond to this concept of a halt to indeterminacy that is of interest. The problem here again seems to stem from how critics, such as Wall and Fish, deal with the issue of irreducible plurality without sliding into a stance that there must be *either* complete indeterminacy *or* complete determinacy by way of resolution. I agree with James Tully on this point that:

it does not follow, as it does for many postmodern writers, that any form of comprehensive reflection on modernity is rendered impossible; that one must simply *accept* the irreducible plurality of my cultures, values, and disciplines. Rather, it is possible to say something more than 'this is my view' or 'the view from culture, gender, etc'. It is possible to recast the philosophical task of a

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38 "Since I need to discuss not only the ways in which real adult authors address real child readers, using narrators ... who address child narratees", Wall states, "but also the ways in which implied authors sometimes set up implied adult readers in texts ostensibly addressed to children, I find that I need all six terms" (p. 4).

'reflection on modernity' as an invitation to a philosophical *conversation* with the diverse voices of modernity and their respective sources and traditions.<sup>39</sup>

This is a position that I want to develop further as I progress through this and subsequent chapters. These chapters seek to move away from an either-or stance, preferring to view the concepts of adults and children and readers' experiences of texts as contested but not for that reason 'undiscussable'.

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**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by Wall? What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?**

This discussion has again canvassed the first question outlined in my Introduction. Similar themes have emerged from those discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the attempted exclusion of ethical/political concerns and problems with the construction of 'the child narratee'. More broadly, however (something not fully developed in the previous chapter), I have discussed Wall's questioning of meaning (her questioning of what constitutes 'children's literature' and 'the child addressed in the book', for example) but her failure to question the apparently *meaningful* structures (such as 'the child narratee' and 'genuine children's literature') that she herself has created. The issues these themes raise again lead into my second question: to what might be adults' investment in these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse?

Wall's approach is problematic. On one level, it is contradictory – Wall engages in what she admits to be a contested area but assumes that her own approach, relying upon the same contested concepts, is unproblematic. "As a critic", she states, "I must accept that any adult writer's perception of children as readers ... may bear little relation to the reality" (p. 89) but she suspends from similar questioning her own perception of children as readers. Wall portrays adult and child readers as passive recipients of the text. They fall neatly into the categories she provides for them: "[t]here are three possible and distinct roles for adult readers of fiction written *to* children besides the intermittent role of adult addressee ... They are the roles of child-addressee, teller-surrogate, and observer-listener" (p. 18). Her approach, like Chambers, is also largely unresponsive to the (ethical, political, cultural and historical) complexity of individual texts and readers. Clearly Wall does have an interest in child readers and in liberating those readers from a literature that is not addressed to them – "I hope to show ... that paying attention to the voice of the narrator can not only enable adult readers to determine whether or not a book

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<sup>39</sup> "Preface", *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ed. Tully, p. xiv.

is for children, but also lead to a greater understanding of children's rights as readers" (p. 199) – but these interests are constantly under question because of the contradictory nature of her discourse. This reinforces my argument, as outlined in the previous chapter, that Wall hides behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader' in order to suppress important questions raised by her approach.

On another broader level, Wall's approach also raises epistemological questions. In order to deal with the inherent contradiction of wanting to talk unproblematically about what are problematic concepts, Wall slips into an either-or stance where interpretation and the concepts of 'the adult', 'the child' and 'children's fiction' appear to be fully determinate and objective.

To further develop this discussion, I again want to turn to the question that is the central concern of this chapter: to what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform Wall's narratological theory and the broader developments in criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced her approach? I have already touched on some of my theoretical/philosophical concerns with Wall's approach. To develop my discussion and place my commentary on Wall's approach in a broader context, I will now turn to the structuralist (narratological) theory of Prince. This discussion will be very brief as I want to say something more about structuralism when I turn to consider Hunt's work, however it seeks to move towards a more comprehensive and critical appreciation/understanding of that theory.

### **Developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced Wall's structuralist narratological approach**

#### *Prince and structuralist narratology: towards a systematic and non-evaluative account of language/literary structures*

Wall is indebted to the concept of the 'narratee' formulated by Prince<sup>40</sup> and the narrative model incorporating that concept devised by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Seymour Chatman.<sup>41</sup> Her approach clearly resembles Prince's:

the portrait of a narratee emerges above all from the narrative addressed to him. If we consider that any narration is composed of a series of signals directed to the narratee, two major categories of signals can be distinguished ... Thanks to the signals describing the narratee, we are able to characterize any narration according

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40 See Prince's "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee", rpt. in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Tompkins, pp. 7-25. (See Wall's acknowledgment [p. ix].) Gérard Genette was also influential in formulating the concept of the narratee.

41 See Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983) and Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). Wall adopts Chatman's six term model of narrative communication, as adapted by Rimmon-Kenan. Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan in turn draw on Prince's concept of the narratee.

to the type of narratee to whom it is addressed.<sup>42</sup>

Both critics place the same emphasis on classification. The relationship between various narrators and narratees can establish a typology of narratives based on the kinds of narrative situations involved and places assigned to the narratees.<sup>43</sup> Prince's approach therefore raises similar questions to Wall's. Prince, for example, devises a concept of a "zero-degree narratee" (p. 10) as a reference point against which to classify several different types of narratees but, like Wall's concept of 'the child narratee', this concept depends upon the construction that Prince places on the signals directed to that figure. While such an approach may uncover highly significant aspects of texts (about different ways in which 'the (child) narratee' has been constructed by different texts) that previous critical readings failed to notice, it is a contested approach; suggestive rather than definitive.

While this point is usually accepted by structuralist critics (such as Barthes in his later poststructuralist work), problems arise when it is not – when critics, like Wall, blend a focus on the internal structure of texts (how various meanings of 'children's literature' have been produced) with a focus on how this information can be used to define a 'genuine children's literature' (a literature that 'genuinely' and unproblematically addresses actual child readers). Such an approach moves away from studying narrative as a self-contained system with its own internal rules and instead engages with the issue of how the signals directed to 'the child narratee' might be related to real child readers and their responses to the text. This is an area in which Wall appears to be interested but never makes her position clear. Unlike Prince, Wall in this way moves away from a focus solely on the text but, where some critics have questioned Prince's approach for reinforcing an image of a stable and determinate text,<sup>44</sup> Wall's interest in the reader-subject is unclear and confusing.

Underpinning structuralist theory<sup>45</sup> is the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (in particular,

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42 Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee", p. 12 and p. 17. Further references will be in the text.

43 Tompkins comments, for example, that "[Prince] regards the concept of the narratee as a newly discovered element of narrative, which, when thoroughly investigated, will be a significant addition to the science of literary structures", "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", p. xii.

44 Tompkins states that "Prince's assumptions about the status of the text and its relation to real readers differ in no way from those of the New Critics. Reading ... consists of discovering what is already there on the page". The reader is a "seeker after the truths, in this case the structures, preserved in literary art", "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", pp. xii-xiii.

45 It is important to acknowledge that structuralism is not a neat category that can be easily described. Many critics in defining such theory blend together with structuralist thought elements of what other critics regard as poststructuralist thought, and many so-called structuralist critics have rejected this label (such as Foucault) or have oscillated between so-called structuralist and poststructuralist positions, with their discourse being inherently critical of structuralist assumptions (Barthes and Culler). I will discuss this further when I turn to Hunt's and Stephens' poststructuralist-inclined approaches. My description of structuralism in the interim is therefore deliberately general.

Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1916), noting that the claims made for Saussure (or more particularly the way in which structuralists have developed aspects his work) is often an area of controversy.<sup>46</sup> Structuralist theory generally describes Saussure as envisaging language as a system, constituted by signs. The linguistic sign consists of two elements, a signifier (word sound) and a signified (word concept), with the link between these two elements being arbitrary (a product of linguistic convention) and differential (language is structured as a system of differences where what one sign *is* is dependent as much on what it is not). Central to structuralist theory is the notion that meaning, rather than being simply given, depends on socially produced systems that transcend the intentional control of individual subjects (although this notion stops short at an interrogation of the apparently meaningful 'structure' structuralist critics themselves put forward).<sup>47</sup>

The meaning of the sign depends upon an underlying system of conventions, codes and rules, the task of the structuralist being to reconstitute the conventions, systems and rules that govern the production of meaning. Structuralist theory is therefore concerned with the way in which meaning is produced, with the code rather than with the message – hence Wall's (not uncontradictory) comment, "[i]n this book I am concerned not with the 'message' but with the nature of the addresser and of the addressee" (p. 3). Such a theory, Barthes states, "will not teach us what meaning must definitively be attributed to a work; it will not provide or even discover a meaning but will describe the logic according to which meanings are engendered".<sup>48</sup> Poststructuralism unsettles the concept of meaning far more radically. While structuralist critics such as Wall, Prince and Barthes (in his early work) presume that the workings of language in literary narrative, as an already constituted and closed system, can be finally reduced to a systematic and ethically/political neutral (non-evaluative) account, problems arise when it is no longer possible to ignore the rhetorical dimension of language. As Culler (not uncontroversially) suggests, "structuralists are convinced that systematic knowledge is possible; post-structuralists claim to know only the impossibility of this knowledge".<sup>49</sup>

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46 See, for example, Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (Houndsmills: Macmillan Press, 1988) and Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*, pp. 63-65. See also Norris, "Truth, Reality and Cultural Critique", in *Theorizing Culture: An Interdisciplinary Critique after Postmodernism*, eds. Barbara Adam and Stuart Allen (London: UCL Press, 1995), pp. 5-8.

47 The insights of structuralist theory have been applied to many aspects of social and cultural activity, including Claude Lévi-Strauss' work in kinship and myth, and Barthes' work in cultural studies.

48 *Critique et Vérité* (1966), p. 63; quoted in Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 32.

49 *On Deconstruction*, p. 22.

**What merits questioning in the assumptions that inform structuralist narratological developments in critical theory (both child critical theory and critical theory in general): opening up issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers?**

To return then to my third question,<sup>50</sup> I would argue that Wall, along with Prince, has tended to *open up* a number of issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers by focusing on the reader and problematising meaning construction.

Wall, in focusing on the various images of 'the child narratee' constructed in various primary texts, as well as on the various definitions of the 'children's book' implied by those images (different ways of talking to readers), and in giving more specific attention than Chambers, Iser and the phenomenology of Husserl to the linguistic structure of the text (meaning as produced by a linguistic structure rather than by some undefined intervention of the reader's consciousness), again uncovers important areas of discussion. It is how Wall moves on from this point, however, that becomes problematic, that is, how she relates these images of 'the child narratee' and definitions of 'children's literature' to the question of actual child readers reading.

Wall, in seeking to define a 'genuine children's literature', clearly has some interest in empirical readers – in children and their experiences of texts – but, like Chambers, her work is untheorised on this point. It is not apparent from where she is drawing her information or how she has shifted from an analysis of the assumptions about 'the child narratee' and 'genuine children's literature' underpinning various texts to an assessment that a given text is or is not *for* child readers outside of the book. While a focus on narrative as a self-contained system with its own internal rules yields up information on the (child) narratee, Wall's concept of the 'child-reader-outside-of-the book' moves outside of this system. This creates additional problems in terms of Wall and Prince not interrogating the authority of their own claims to meaning, the apparently meaningful structures that they themselves have put forward (such as Wall's six term narrative model). Such critics therefore tend, on the one hand, to *open up* some issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics and the concepts of 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers but, on the other hand, to close down other issues concerning these areas through an emphasis on a supposedly systematic, non-evaluative account of the workings of language in literature (that over-simplifies historical and cultural differences), so as not to collapse their entire approach. As I have suggested and will explore further, this raises important epistemological and ethical/political questions about the structuralist approach.

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<sup>50</sup> My conclusions here are again preliminary until I have discussed Hunt's and Stephens' 'poststructuralist-inclined' approaches (poststructuralist theory being itself a critique of structuralism) and some of the other reader-oriented approaches to child literature.



## SECTION THREE

### Issues in structuralist/poststructuralist theories: Hunt

Hunt's critical position on child literature has shifted over time. In the mid 1970s, as discussed in Chapter 2, he assumed a book-centred critical position.<sup>51</sup> However, in his most recent critical work, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (1991),<sup>52</sup> Hunt has developed what he has termed a "childist" theory of child literature – "[i]n terms of children's books, I shall be advocating a new critical approach: 'childist' criticism"<sup>53</sup> – and, in doing so, has called into question many of the critical assumptions he once held:

[t]he child-reader's interpretation of a text, given that there is ... no single or stable meaning in the text, is inferior only in terms of the game imposed from the outside (p. 194) ... I have suggested reading, as far as possible, from a child's point of view, taking into account personal, sub-cultural, experiential, and psychological differences between children and adults – in short, allowing the reader precedence over the book. (p. 198)

*Adults and children are both part of the same 'reading (interpretive) community' – we can therefore determine (to some extent?) the codes/conventions/structures that shape adults' and children's reading experiences*

Hunt's primary concern is with how children might read the text. He emphasises that because adult and child reading experiences are essentially different – "[c]hildren are *developing* readers; their approach to life and text stems from a different set of cultural standards from those of adult readers" (p. 87) – the best way to determine how children read might therefore be to start by examining how adults read: "I would like to work out the difference between the way a child reads and the way an adult reads ... If we examine the way in which a 'skilled' reader reads – how we as adults make meaning – we may be able to seek what a developing reader lacks" (p. 3). Adult readers' understanding of texts, Hunt suggests, "may rest on belonging to 'interpretive communities' which not only

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51 "Whatever critical theory we produce for children's literature", Hunt states, "it will have little or nothing to do with children. Thus we may say, Book X is literature (as opposed to reading matter), or Book Y is good literature (as opposed to not-so-good), regardless of whether children actually read it, or like it, or buy it ... it is irrelevant to consult children on the quality or value of their books, and positively dangerous to generalize from any findings", "Criticism and Children's Literature", p. 119 and p. 120.

52 This work brings together, in amended form, many of Hunt's essays on child literature criticism published over the last five years, including: "New Directions in Narrative Theory", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1990), pp. 46-47; "Degrees of Control: Stylistics and the Discourse of Children's Literature", in *Styles of Discourse*, ed. Nikolas Coupland (London: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 163-182; "Necessary Misreadings: Directions in Narrative Theory for Children's Literature", pp. 107-121; "Childist Criticism: The Subculture of the Child, the Book and the Critic", pp. 42-59; and "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", pp. 180-200. My commentary will focus mainly on Hunt's book-length work although I will refer to these essays, and others referenced in my bibliography, where relevant.

53 *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 16. Further references will be in the text.

know the rules of the game but share their knowledge and attitudes" (p. 87). Broadly then, Hunt seeks to lay bare the codes and conventions that shape adults' reading experiences (codes and conventions that can to some extent be determined because adult readers belong to the same interpretive community) and explore how children's reading experiences might differ:

[texts] contain potential meanings structured in complex linguistic and semantic code-systems. Our access to these meanings depends on our decoding skills. If we are to understand what children tell us about texts, it is important that we know just what the codes are, and what skills we actually need to unravel them. But, at the root of this, we need to establish the difference between the way a skilled reader decodes and understands and the way a developing reader does so ... I would like to look not at what readers bring to the text and how they react, but at what codes texts actually contain. (p. 89)

Hunt's approach, like Wall's and Culler's,<sup>54</sup> as I will shortly discuss, is therefore to isolate a set of facts (meaningful structures, codes, conventions) and then construct a model to account for those facts:

'once we see as our task the analysing of literary competence as manifested in the interpretive strategies of readers, then the activities of readers ... present us with a host of facts to explain ... to intend meanings is to assume a system of conventions and to create signs within the perspective of that system'. (p. 69)<sup>55</sup>

Of interest are the codes, conventions, rules and structures that enable meaning production rather than how meaning originates from the reader-subject or the text-object.

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To take this position further is to question the role of the individual subject (reader, consciousness, self) as the ultimate guarantor of meaning (the human being as subject contemplating what is to be known, the objective world), a course that Hunt *generally does not pursue* (although not without some equivocation on this point, as I will discuss). This would be to maintain (to deliberately state this position in what are controversial terms) that textual facts do not exist independently of readers' experiences but are a product of interpretive strategies and, in turn, these interpretive strategies proceed not from readers but from interpretive communities of which those readers are members. The reader-subject is therefore as much a product of that community (of interpretive codes and conventions) as the meanings it enables him/her to produce. Meaning does not originate from some arbitrary, independent will and nor is it conditioned by something in the text.<sup>56</sup>

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54 "There is little reason", Culler states, "to worry initially about the validity of the facts which one sets out to explain. The important thing is to start by isolating a set of facts and then to construct a model to account for them", *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1995), p. 128.

55 Hunt quotes Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading", in *The Reader in the Text*, eds. Suleiman and Crosman, p. 50.

56 As suggested, I am deliberately using controversial terms here. The notion of meaning not being

As I will discuss, such a viewpoint has broader implications not only for the nature of meaning and interpretive authority, and the undertaking of ethical/political critique, but also for the status of the reader-subject.

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Hunt's approach raises a number of questions concerning the determinability of these interpretive codes and conventions. He clearly regards the codes and conventions that underpin 'the adult reading experience' as able to be determined: "[i]n a moment, I will draw together some of the points from this analysis to see if we can *categorize* the kinds of knowledge and skills we need to have to decode a text, and how far children – that is, developing readers – can be said to possess them" (p. 94, emphasis added). Importantly, however, Hunt does not close off such questions or regard his approach as unproblematic (although his approach is somewhat contradictory here).<sup>57</sup> He comments, for example, that "[f]or all readers, and for developing readers especially, the encounter with the text, although rule-governed to some extent, is very volatile" (p. 98).

Nevertheless, as is apparent from this comment, it is interesting that Hunt assumes 'the adult reading experience' to be easier to define than 'the child reading experience': "[c]learly, we are puzzled as to what sense children who are 'developing' readers make of a text, as compared with adults or skilled readers" (p. 97). His approach therefore relies upon the existence of a relatively stable set of interpretive codes and conventions underpinning a therefore relatively stable adult reading experience against which he can then contrast child readers' lack of these codes and conventions and hence highlight the more volatile, uncertain and radical nature of 'the child reading experience'.

Hunt is concerned here with the activities of 'an ideal adult reader' who reads "competently" in a way that "smooths out the differences between individual readers" (p. 97). This concept again sits uneasily, however, with his earlier comment that "there is going to be a considerable gap of understanding between ... different types of readers of different ages and at different times and in different cultures" (p. 93). Hunt therefore seeks to 'smooth out' (shut out?) cultural, socio-political (class, race, and gender) and historical differences between adult readers<sup>58</sup> while, in a somewhat contradictory way, at

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constrained by something in the text, for example, has been heavily contested. (See Gadamer's point, as discussed in the next chapter, that we are *in dialogue* with the text. As well as interrogating the text, it must be allowed to pose its questions to us.)

57 In this context, it will be my argument over this chapter and Chapter 6 that, in exploring the concepts of (the reality of) children and children's experiences of the text, Hunt and Stephens have acknowledged that these are *contested* concepts and sought to develop an approach that engages with these concepts as sites of contestation and dialogue, although (as I have suggested) not without some contradiction.

58 Similarly, although he acknowledges *historical* differences between child readers, he does not discuss cultural and socio-political differences between child readers, suggesting that his interest is

the same time drawing attention to cultural and certain socio-political differences between adult and child readers: "I have suggested reading, as far as possible, from a child's point of view, taking into account personal, sub-cultural, experiential, and psychological differences between children and adults" (p. 198).

The broadly 'structuralist' approach of Fish and Culler (as represented in their early work)<sup>59</sup> underpins Hunt's project to outline a "poetics of children's literature" (p. 74), a poetics based upon a re-seeing of 'child culture'. "Our perceptions of narrative patterns", Hunt observes, "are based on an appeal to a common culture, and the culture of the primary readers of children's literature is not necessarily ours", so this "means that the adult has to accept counter-readings, readings which seem perverse or illogical, as a necessary part of the child interpreting the text". (p. 74).

This 'counter-culture of childhood' is clearly regarded by Hunt as another interpretive community (one different from the adult's) whose codes and conventions of reading or, more accurately, lack of adult reading codes and conventions (p. 90) can also be determined, albeit in a *restricted* sense as Hunt clarifies. The key issue here, as I have stressed, is *how* he clarifies this point. Hunt acknowledges that the relationship between child readers and the text is a "complex one" (p. 58) and that "the problem of defining what we mean by 'reading as a child' is not a small one" (p. 192) but states, "surely we can have *some* idea of what children understand" (p. 87). In this way, he proceeds down a complex path in seeking to retrieve some sense of a stable meaning/claim to knowledge:

there is a spectrum between what is 'objectively' correct – that is, something which all speakers of the language will agree on as being 'there' in the text – and things which are subjective and purely personal ... We read within a reading community, and therefore can share meanings and understandings (p. 88); and

[i]t is obvious that there are limits to the shared making of meaning ... But we have to assume a certain congruence between what you see and what I see and what a child-reader sees; otherwise the whole business of making books (and, especially, talking about them) becomes a nonsense. There must be a middle ground of common-sense agreement about what meaning is. (pp. 88-89)

Hunt makes a significant point here, although there are obviously questions concerning his foundation appeal to a "middle ground of common-sense agreement"<sup>60</sup> and to the notion of 'interpretive communities'.

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in a generalised child reader. I will come back to this point in Chapter 6.

59 As I will discuss, Fish's and Culler's early work (excluding here Fish's even earlier work in reader-response) could be said to be broadly structuralist but it is also critical of some of the limitations of structuralism and hence at times poised between structuralism and poststructuralism.

60 While Hunt is to some extent critical of his assumptions in using such a term this is to a strictly limited extent. The implications of this term are never fully developed, engaged with or explored in his work (I will return to this issue in Chapter 6). It is of interest in this context to consider Davidson's highly sophisticated discussion of his "principle of charity", as discussed in the following chapter, which is (very broadly) directed towards similar ends.

**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by Hunt? What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?**

This discussion has again explored in a preliminary way the first question outlined in my Introduction. While I want to come back to Hunt's work (and discuss Stephen's work) in Chapter 6, similar themes have emerged to those discussed in the previous chapter, particularly concerning Hunt's construction of 'child reading experience', 'the child interpretive community' and 'child culture'. As I will discuss further, in relation to Fish's work, Hunt's notion of 'interpretive communities' is undertheorised and *reductive* of the complex nature of societies and cultures. Interpretive communities are always more complicated than this model allows, for people belong to many different interpretive communities and often to conflicting interpretive communities. How these interpretive communities are to be identified is also unclear. (Further, such a notion has ethical/political implications.) As Hunt's comments have already indicated, he has shifted from the notion of many interpretive communities, through the notion of two such communities (one comprised of adults and the other of children), and finally to the notion of *one* community (a community brought together by 'common-sense agreement'). Even the slightly broader model of an interpretive community comprised of adults and an interpretive community comprised of children remains highly problematic and overly simplistic. It ignores the point that adults and children belong to several communities, including those divided by gender, class, culture, ethnicity, geography and so on. His notions of an 'adult interpretive community' and a 'child interpretive community' erase differences between children and between adults. As Perry Nodelman observes, Hunt claims that,

child readers are different from adult readers primarily because we are *all* different from each other and because we all read in the context of our differing experiences. But in fact, his central thesis ... depends centrally on a pair of assumptions that effectively deny the significance of those idiosyncratic differences: that all adults read alike and that all children read alike".<sup>61</sup>

The questions these themes raise again lead me to my second question: to what might be adults' investment in these privileged images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse? Clearly, Hunt does have an interest in child readers and in liberating those readers from 'adultist' theories of reading but this interest is constantly called into question by the contradictions in his discourse. As I have discussed, the concepts of 'child reading experience', 'the child interpretive community' and 'child culture' are built upon a contested knowledge of children and their reading experiences and, once established by Hunt, are often employed in ways that are

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61 "The Second Kind of Criticism", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1992), pp. 38.

contradictory and inconsistent. This reinforces my argument, as outlined in the previous chapter, that Hunt hides behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader' in order to suppress important questions raised by his approach.

To further develop my discussion, I again want to turn to the question that is the central concern of this chapter: to what merits inquiry in the assumptions that inform Hunt's structuralist/poststructuralist theory and the broader developments in theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced his approach? To place my discussion of Hunt's approach in a broader context, I will now turn to the structuralist/poststructuralist theories of Culler and Fish.

### **Developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy that appear to have influenced Hunt's structuralist/poststructuralist approach**

Hunt would appear to differentiate his approach from Culler and Fish when they move into a more radical 'poststructuralist' stance on the nature of meaning and interpretation, and the status of the reader-subject (a shift that occurs within Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* and is apparent within Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*). However, he adopts a more strongly poststructuralist stance in some aspects of his approach. This inevitably sets up a tension in Hunt's work, a tension that is also apparent in Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* and Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*. This tension sets the context for the following discussion.

*The pre-poststructuralist Fish: claiming 'the ideal Fishian reading experience' as representative of the reading experiences of all informed readers*

Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* comprises a series of essays that, as Fish acknowledges in his introduction, is marked by a division between those essays written before and those written after the essay, "Interpreting the *Variorum*" (1975).<sup>62</sup> I want to focus my comments at this point on the 'structuralist-inclined' essays written *before* "Interpreting the *Variorum*".

In "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" (1970<sup>63</sup>), Fish proposed the concept of "linguistic competence", to escape (as he later states in his 1980 introduction to *Is There a Text in this Class?*) from the charge of subjectivism.<sup>64</sup> From this position, Fish

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<sup>62</sup> "Having redefined the activity of criticism so that it was no longer a matter of demonstration but a matter (endlessly negotiated) of persuasion", Fish states, "I am faced with the task of accounting, within the new model, for everything that had been recognized under the old model as being constitutive of the literary institution ... That task is begun ... especially in those [essays] written after "Interpreting the *Variorum*", *Is There a Text in this Class?*, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> *Is There a Text in this Class?*, pp. 21-67. Further references will be in the text.

<sup>64</sup> Fish states, "it was necessary to remove the chief objection to talking about the experience of the reader, to wit, that there are (at least potentially) as many experiences as there are readers ... I met

developed the concept of the "informed reader" (p. 48) (as someone who possessed linguistic and literary competence), a concept that was to be central to his work through to "Interpreting the *Variorum*". Fish's approach, however, as underpinned by this concept was to be heavily criticised (including later by Fish himself). At this point, Fish's interest was still largely in the experiences of readers as they negotiated the text word by word, sentence by sentence (as it had been in his earlier work<sup>65</sup>). He conceded, however, towards the end of "Literature in the Reader", that readers' experiences of the text are "immediately compromised the moment you say anything about it" (p. 67), that there is a difference between the direct experience of reading and the report of that experience.<sup>66</sup> This immediately raised questions about whose experience and what experience Fish was reporting. As Culler later argues, "[Fish's] accounts of the reading experience are reports of Fish reading as a Fishian reader reading as a Fishian reader".<sup>67</sup> Essentially then, Fish had claimed that his (own *ideal* Fishian description of his) reading experience followed the natural practice of 'informed readers'.<sup>68</sup>

As well as the concept of 'linguistic competence', Fish can also clearly be seen in his earlier essays to be developing the concept of 'interpretive communities'. As I will discuss, however, in his later essays he turns to this concept not to support the notion of an 'informed reader' or further expound upon a structuralist position (as Culler seeks to do) but rather to radically question the nature of meaning and the sources of interpretive authority: "[t]he notion of 'interpretive communities', which had surfaced occasionally in

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that objection by positing a level of experience which all readers share, independently of differences in education and culture ... [a level] of linguistic competence, a linguistic system that every native speaker shares. I reasoned that if the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform" (pp. 4-5).

65 See Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967) and *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1972). In these studies, Fish focused on readers' experience of the text in a way broadly resembling Iser's phenomenological approach. He later became critical of this approach admitting that he, like Iser, had equivocated between "a reference to the action of the text *on* a reader and the actions performed *by* a reader as he negotiates (and, in some senses, actualizes) the text". "This equivocation", Fish continues, "allowed me to retain the text as a stable entity at the same time as I was dislodging it as a privileged container of meaning", *Is There a Text in this Class?*, p. 3.

66 Similarly, Freund states, "no discursive *analysis* of the event of reading will coincide with the reading *experience* which, if it is to be itself, must remain private, mute, inexpressible". She continues, "[b]ut since this gap between experience and its representations would devalue, if not altogether terminate, the reader-response mode of analysis before it has begun, it must be suppressed", *The Return of the Reader*, p. 95. Freund raises an important issue here about how some reader-response criticism, such as Fish's early work, unsatisfactorily suppresses the gap between experience and its representations. However, she clearly sees this gap as *shutting down* discussion of readers' experiences of the text rather than as problematising such a discussion: either the gap between experience and its representations must be unsatisfactorily "suppressed" or the project "terminated" altogether – there are no other options.

67 *On Deconstruction*, p. 66.

68 As Fish later acknowledges, he had treated his own experience of 'informed reading' as the norm (in relation to which other experiences were viewed as lesser rather than different) and had sought to persuade readers to adopt a set of community assumptions so that they would read like a 'Fishian' reader, while never making these interests explicit.

my discourse before, now becomes central to it. Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features" (p. 14). I will come back to Fish's 'post-structuralist turn' later.

### *The structuralist/poststructuralist Culler*

(a) *Questioning the concept of the individual subject as the ultimate guarantor of meaning (does this also rule out discussion of notions of 'self-awareness' and 'self-development'?)*

At this point, I want to focus my comments on Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) and *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981) rather than on his later work, *On Deconstruction* (1983).

Culler was particularly critical of Fish's development of the concept of 'linguistic competence' (which had formed the basis of Fish's theory of the 'informed reader'), preferring to develop this concept within a more strongly defined structuralist/semiotics framework.<sup>69</sup> He argued that Fish had failed to theorise the conventions of reading that so-called 'informed readers' follow when they read, therefore closing off an important area of inquiry, that is, "to make explicit the procedures and conventions of reading, to offer a comprehensive theory of the ways in which we go about making sense of various kinds of texts".<sup>70</sup> This strongly resembles Hunt's approach.

Culler's critical approach is based on a linguistic model: "[t]o speak of the structure of a sentence is necessarily to imply an internalized grammar that gives it that structure".<sup>71</sup> The structure of a literary work similarly implies a grammar or set of conventions, a linguistic as well as a "literary competence" (p. 114), that enables readers to select particular features of a text according to shared notions of what is an "acceptable" interpretation: "the possibility of critical argument depends on shared notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable" (p. 124). The literary text therefore has meaning "only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated" (p. 116). Of interest to Culler then, like Hunt, are the codes and conventions that govern this process of meaning production rather than how meaning originates from the reader or text.

To take this position further is to question the role of the individual subject as the ultimate guarantor of meaning, a course that Culler, unlike Hunt, *generally does pursue* (although

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<sup>69</sup> See Culler, "Stanley Fish and the Righting of the Reader", *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 119-131.

<sup>70</sup> *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 125. "A theory focused on the reader and reading", Culler states, "ought to undertake to make explicit the implicit knowledge that readers deploy in responding as they do. But Fish fails to take this step" (p. 11).

<sup>71</sup> *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 113. Further references will be in the text.



not, as I will discuss, without some equivocation on this point<sup>72</sup> or to the full poststructuralist/neo-pragmatist extent of Fish's later work). To again deliberately state this position in somewhat controversial terms, textual facts do not exist independently of readers' experiences but are a product of interpretative strategies and, in turn, these interpretive strategies proceed not from readers but from "systems of convention" (Culler, p. 29) to which readers belong. The individual subject is therefore a conventional construct, as much a product of those interpretive codes and conventions as the meanings they enable him/her to produce. Meaning does not originate from the reader-subject and nor is it conditioned by something in the text-object. Again, this position has broader implications, implications that are treated in a contradictory way in Culler's work.

Culler wavers, for example, between a *denial* of the 'self' as a conscious subject actively endowing the world with meaning and an *affirmation* of self-awareness and self-development. (As I will discuss, such an affirmation in itself is not so much the problem here as critics such as Tompkins and Freund have suggested. Rather, the problem is that Culler takes a contradictory stance in appearing to have ruled out such an affirmation.) On the one hand, Culler confirms that meaning is "explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject" (p. 28). This does not deny the existence or activity of individuals – individuals choose when to speak and what to say – "but these acts are made possible by a series of systems which the subject does not control" so that the self "comes to appear more and more as a construct, the result of systems of convention" (p. 29).<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, however, he suggests that in making "explicit" the conventional nature of literary activity "one gains considerably in self-awareness and awareness of the nature of literature as an institution" and also becomes "more open to the most challenging and innovatory texts" (p. 129). Such literature, Culler continues, "challenges the limits we set to the self as a device of order and allows us, painfully or joyfully, to accede to an expansion of self" (p. 130). As Tompkins rightly observes, "[w]hen Culler speaks of 'innovatory literature,' which catalyzes the process of self-expansion, the text as an object of knowledge and the self that responds to it seem to creep back into his theory". His position, she concludes (somewhat more questionably), appears to hover between "a structuralist rejection of self as an organizing principle and a liberal humanism that defines moral and intellectual growth in terms of self-awareness and self-development".<sup>74</sup> Freund makes a similar point.<sup>75</sup>

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72 As Freund suggests, *Structuralist Poetics* sees Culler "precariously situated between the classical principles of structuralist thinking on the one hand and what is termed (somewhat vaguely) post-structuralist thought on the other", *The Return of the Reader*, p. 70.

73 Similarly, Culler emphasises that "the notion of competence does not lead ... to a reinstatement of the individual subject as source of meaning" (p. 258).

74 "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", p. xviii.

75 Freund comments, "the question arises whether it is the reader who is master of the systems of intelligibility or whether he is himself over-mastered by the systems". This "equivocation", she

I agree with Freund and Tompkins that there are problems with Culler's contradictory stance here in terms of his wavering between an affirmation and a denial of the self *in contradiction* to his stated position, at least initially, of rejecting the individual subject as source of meaning. However, as commented above, I have difficulties with their suggestion that, in questioning the role of the individual subject as the ultimate guarantor of meaning, *any* emphasis on self-awareness and self-development must be ruled out. The questioning of the role of the 'individual subject' in Culler's work is therefore viewed by Freund and Tompkins in distinctly 'either-or-ist' terms: Culler must either accept the 'dissolution of the subject' and with it the invalidity of concepts of human experience and agency or fall back into a so-called 'liberal-humanist' position. However, I would argue that Culler's early work here, in its peculiar oscillation on the concept of the 'self', could be viewed as *resisting* being drawn into such 'either-or-ism' (although, because he does not elaborate on/theorise about this tension in his approach, his position is finally contradictory). I will return to this point shortly.

*(b) We can determine (to some extent?) the codes/conventions/structures that shape the reading experiences of 'competent readers' - ruling in notions of 'justification' and 'logical argument'*

Like Hunt, Culler regards the codes and conventions that underpin the reading experiences of 'competent readers' as able to be determined. Importantly, Culler (again like Hunt) acknowledges that this process is not unproblematic. In this regard, Culler appears to take up a more strongly (poststructuralist) sceptical position on claims to knowledge and on the status of so-called 'facts' concerning the readers' experiences of the text. Such a stance creates problems, however, when Culler does not extend this scepticism to the claims of his own interpretive project, to the 'facts' (meaningful structures/codes) that he himself puts forward. He appeals, for example, to a meaning that is "justifiable": "[t]he meaning of a poem within the institution of literature is not the immediate and spontaneous reaction of individual readers but the meanings which they are willing to accept as both plausible and *justifiable* when they are explained" (p. 124, emphasis added). In order to stress the validity of these meanings, Culler therefore suggests that the critic is able to reason, apply logic, and draw on facts that have a higher validity claim and are not open to the same critique. Hence Freund's criticism of Culler's position:

[t]o explain 'facts' about literary works, about their form and meaning is, Culler claims, to specify the conditions or systems of intelligibility which govern reading. But what is a *fact* if not, by a circular route, the product of these systems? In his account, some 'essential' facts would be: that reading poetry is rule-governed process; that there is a range of agreement or disagreement about a certain text ... It

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continues, informs Culler's account of literary competence "which subscribes on the one hand to the semiotic axiom of the dissolution of the subject, but which concludes, on the other, with a rousing variation of the humanist theme of 'know thyself'", *The Return of the Reader*, p. 84. Further references will be in the text.

appears that 'facts' are carefully selected instances of consensual critical practice. The question, however, arises ... whether facts are indeed 'essential' in the sense of universal, absolute and transhistorical, or whether they are themselves the product of a system of agreement about what will count as a 'fact' ... It is not accidental that Culler's presuppositions regarding facts are not permitted to interrogate the status of his own discourse, since the project of a theory of reading seeks to found itself on a certain notion of facts. (p. 83)<sup>76</sup>

Freund could be viewed here as pushing Culler into a version of a self-refuting paradox. As I will discuss in the following chapter, this is again to look at the issue of 'justification' (reason and logic) in 'either-or-ist' terms: to maintain *either* that all reference to justification and logic should be irrelevant *or* that we are faced with highly questionable objectivist foundational justifications (while again admitting that Culler does himself, by virtue of at times adopting a strong sceptical position, fall into a contradictory stance of apparent affirmation versus apparent denial). Culler's stronger position on the self and meaning is highlighted by Freund (rather than his less strong, albeit frequently contradictory, position on the 'self' and meaning<sup>77</sup>), and under the terms of this position his approach becomes self-contradictory. By Freund's reading, Culler therefore falls into the similar problems that he was later to observe in Iser's work (as previously discussed). The contradictory elements in Culler's work suggest a dualistic theory that accepts both fact and interpretation but, as he later says of Iser (in what needs to be seen as a fully poststructuralist interrogation of meaning and claims to knowledge), the "mistake is to take the dualism necessary to stories of reading as theoretically sound, not realizing that the variable distinction between fact and interpretation or text's contribution and reader's contribution will break down under theoretical scrutiny".<sup>78</sup> This is to focus on how it is in the interest of some critics, themselves positioned at one pole – such as the fully-poststructuralist Culler in *On Deconstruction* speaking about Iser or the heralding-the-end-of-the-reader-response-project Freund speaking about Culler's early work – to position other critics at an opposing (rejected) pole to reinforce their argument that a dialogue between these two poles (or rather a conversation with the diverse voices in the space in between these poles) is impossible.

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76 Similarly, Holub comments, while Culler is "undoubtedly correct in assuming that rules and conventions allow us to make sense out of literature, any attempt to formulate these enabling rules will inevitably encounter the same problems that led critics to abandon the notion of a determinant text. Why should we be able to pin down conventions ... if the texts themselves remain always elusive? Or ... why shouldn't the conventions be infinitely extendable, like interpretations of texts?", *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 157.

77 Like Hunt, Culler appeals to a notion of 'common ground' to find his way through this problem: "[u]nless [the critic] thinks that he is merely recounting ... the adventures of his own subjectivity, he claims that his interpretation is related to the text in ways which he presumes his readers will accept once those relations are pointed out ... the possibility of critical argument depends on shared notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable, a common ground" (p. 124). This notion is even more problematic, however, in Culler's work, not only because (like Hunt) he does not discuss it in any degree of detail or elaborate upon the assumptions informing such a term, but also because he does occasionally (more so than Hunt) claim a more strongly sceptical position.

78 *On Deconstruction*, pp. 75-76. See Culler's comment on Iser earlier in this chapter at my footnote 16.

(c) *Absence of overt ethical/political critique*

Culler's approach also raises ethical and political questions. If meaning is a product of interpretive codes and conventions, then *whose* codes and conventions prevail makes all the difference. Culler states, for example, that if readers "do not accept the facts one sets out to explain as bearing any relation to their knowledge and experience of literature", then the critic's theory "will be of little interest". The critic must therefore "*convince* his readers that meanings or effects which he is attempting to account for are indeed appropriate ones" (p. 124, emphasis added).

Culler therefore appeals to certain "appropriate" 'facts' about readers' experiences of the text, not facts that are "justifiable" this time but 'facts' that are reliant for their status upon the critic's 'suasive rhetoric' (this recalls Fish's position in his most recent work as I will discuss). This not only reinforces Culler's sceptical position (there are no 'facts' just suasive rhetoric) but also draws attention to an absence of questioning about the ethical/political implications, for example, of critics seeking to convince their readers that the meanings for which they are attempting to account are indeed *appropriate* ones.

(d) *Claiming 'the ideal (Cullerian) reading experience' as representative of the reading experiences of all 'competent readers'*

Finally, Culler's interest is not in individual empirical readers but in an 'ideal (Cullerian) reader': "[t]he question is not what actual readers happen to do but what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature" (pp. 123-124).<sup>79</sup> (As discussed earlier, in relation to Fish's work, this is a position of which Culler later becomes highly suspicious.) Like Fish, Culler does not therefore allow for (he over-simplifies) historical, cultural and social differences between readers that may undermine conformity in reading practices.<sup>80</sup>

This discussion on Fish's and Culler's work provides a broader context against which to review Hunt's work, particularly in terms of focusing on the tensions of a position arguably poised between structuralism and poststructuralism.

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<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Hunt's conclusion – that the readings of the text resulting from his childist approach are the "best possible" readings by people deprived of some of the codes of reading which make meaning" (p. 96) (that is, by *people* but not necessarily children) – raises similar questions about whether his accounts of 'the adult reading experience' and 'the child reading experience' (his "reading from the child's point of view", for example) are not more accurately reports of Hunt reading as a Huntian skilled adult reader and of Hunt reading as a Huntian unskilled/developing child reader.

<sup>80</sup> Culler acknowledges this critique of his position in his later work, *The Pursuit of Signs*.

**What merits questioning in the assumptions that inform structuralist/poststructuralist developments in critical theory (both child critical theory and critical theory in general): opening up issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers?**

Hunt argues for a criticism based on the "possibilities and probabilities" of understanding children's reading experiences: "[c]hildist criticism ... is based on possibilities and probabilities, not in the absence of empirical data, but in the face of the immense difficulty of dealing with that data" (p. 194). There are a number of difficulties with such an approach, however, in terms of its emphasis on "possibilities and *probabilities*".

While Hunt talks of the 'possibilities' and the 'suggestive' potential of his childist approach – "Fish's argument that, because the analytic method dictates what is perceived, stylistics is a 'closed' system, is only a stumbling block if stylistics pretends to be definitive rather than suggestive" (p. 103) – he also talks of its 'probabilities': "only if we laboriously sketch out some of the possible processes in the experience of texts can we move on to the much more important stage of deciding which of those processes are *probable* for any given reader" (p. 94, emphasis added).<sup>81</sup> A position based on 'possibilities' is more defensible, however, than one based on 'probabilities', particularly given all the problems and uncertainties (not the least of them epistemological) that Hunt himself highlights in exploring the issue of children's experiences of the text.

In terms of moving towards the 'probabilities' of children's reading experiences, Hunt points to the problems with empirical studies in this area: the "answers you get" depend upon "what questions you ask" and children "tend to say what you want them to say". He admits, however, that "skilled work with children" is "richly informative" (pp. 94-95). Hunt's criticism of empirical studies here is rather more on practical than epistemological grounds: "*skilled* work" with children can be "richly informative". In choosing, at this point, not to engage with the broader epistemological questions raised by empirical work (and his own approach), Hunt implies that empirical studies could simply be done better. He concludes these comments, for example, by stating that "most adults do not realize what is happening when they read, so we need to make a map of what happens, so that when children say where they are, adults will be able to recognize what they are saying" (p. 95). This signals an interest perhaps in Hunt's work in combining his approach with empirical research – "[w]e should, therefore, bear [this approach] in mind when interpreting what a reader tells us about a book" (p. 96) – and looking at ways of moving

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<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Hunt states, "[o]f course, we are dealing only in possibilities, and there is no statistical method for proving that one form [of dialogue presentation] is more common than another in any particular kind of text" (p. 114) but earlier he commented, "[o]f course, some of my decisions may be – and indeed are – arbitrary. But to analyse a text in this way provides a fairly objective yardstick" (p. 108).

the discussion from a generalised/idealised child reader to individual child readers. (These are important issues to which I will return in Chapter 6.)

At a later point, however, Hunt does hint at epistemological concerns with empirical studies of so-called 'facts' of children's reading experiences, with the interpretation of those 'facts' and other problems with mediating children's own 'un-adult-erated' experiences: that there is a problem with "the observer influencing what is to be observed, as well as with interpretation" (pp. 189-190). As was the case with Culler, in assuming this more sceptical position Hunt calls into question the status of his own interpretive project, his reliance upon certain 'facts' of the adult reading experience that are not interrogated: "I would like to look not at what readers bring to the text and how they read, but at what codes texts *actually* contain" (p. 90, emphasis added). While this statement is consistent with Hunt's appeal earlier in his study to 'a middle ground of common-sense agreement' and he does not necessarily exclude challenges to his model (although only perhaps in terms of the suggestion of another model rather than on broader epistemological grounds), this all sits uneasily with his later more sceptical questioning (on epistemological grounds) of the status of empirical 'facts' of children's reading experiences and also with his acknowledgment of similar epistemological concerns with a stylistics approach to literature.

Hunt agrees with Fish about some of the problems with a stylistics approach<sup>82</sup> – that early 'formalist' stylistics, with its "air of objectivity", confers a "spurious authority on a process that is often only a rationalization of unexamined judgements" (Hunt, p. 102). However, the question is how far Hunt pursues Fish's more sceptical questioning of stylistics on epistemological grounds<sup>83</sup> and whether he ever pays more than 'lip-service' to the broader epistemological issues raised by these observations.

It is interesting, in this regard, that while Hunt earlier quotes Fish's concluding comment to this more sceptical second essay – "[t]here is ... 'always a formal pattern but it is not always the same one'" (p. 74)<sup>84</sup> – he uses this point to support his argument that the formal pattern (codes and conventions) that constitutes the adult reading experience is not shared by children ("[o]ur perceptions of narrative patterns ... are based on an appeal to a

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82 In his criticism of stylistics, "What is Stylistics and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?" (pp. 68-96), Fish states that he does not so much deny the possibility of cataloguing formal features of texts as seek to draw attention to the difficulties that arise when moving from the description of formal features to an interpretation of their meaning.

83 In his later essays (see, for example, "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It? Part II" [pp. 246-267]), Fish goes further in his critique to regard these seemingly objective 'facts'/descriptions' as themselves *interpretive* ("linguistic and textual facts, rather than being the objects of interpretation, are its products" [p. 9]), this critique having much broader implications.

84 Hunt quotes Fish, "What is Stylistics?: Part II", p. 267.

common culture, and the culture of the primary readers of children's literature is not necessarily ours" [p. 74]) rather than to call attention to Fish's point that there is *no* formal pattern that one can point to as a 'fact' that stands apart from the rhetorical dimension of language. Later, however, Hunt hints at his agreement with Fish's fully sceptical position that there is no distinction between description and interpretation – "to describe form is to make a critical statement" (p. 103) – and he appears to quote approvingly from Fish's essay,

[a]s Stanley Fish points out, 'formal patterns are themselves the products of interpretation and therefore there is no such thing as a formal pattern, at least in the sense necessary for the practice of stylistics ... that is, no pattern that one can observe before interpretation is hazarded and which therefore can be used to prefer one interpretation to another'. (p. 116)<sup>85</sup>

Hunt's position is therefore inconsistent. All of this echoes, to some extent, the inconsistencies and contradictions in Culler's early work. I suggest that the tensions in Hunt's work therefore need to be viewed in the context of his resistance to the fully sceptical position that Fish later assumes. Hunt seeks to draw back from Fish's position in order to keep open a critical space to discuss the issue of children's experiences of the text, while recognising that this is a contested issue. Nevertheless, the terms upon which he argues for a childist approach and his engagement with Fish's position are sometimes inconsistent and he has therefore at times shut down aspects of this discussion.

To return then to my third question (noting that these conclusions are somewhat preliminary until my discussion on Hunt's and Stephens' poststructuralist approaches in Chapter 6), I would argue that Hunt, along with Culler and Fish, have tended to *open up* a number of issues about language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the (child) reader' and (child) readers by focusing on readers and problematising meaning construction. Unlike Culler and Fish in their fully sceptical stance, however, Hunt does not seek to open up these issues to an unlimited extent. That said, Hunt has also closed down other important issues.

I will come back to this point in my comments on Hunt's work in Chapter 6. For now, however, I want to break from discussing his work in order to further broaden my discussion on poststructuralist theory or rather theories (acknowledging that there is a range of positions and approaches rather than a single definition that constitutes 'poststructuralist practice'). The work of Derrida and Derridean deconstruction will be significant in this discussion, noting that 'Derrida' and 'deconstruction', like 'poststructuralism', are also terms/sites of much debate.

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85 Hunt quotes Fish, "What is Stylistics?: Part II", p. 267.

In the final part of this chapter, I want to discuss some 'myths' about poststructuralism (some of the extremes of a *caricatured* poststructuralism) and close with a brief discussion of Fish's poststructuralist/neopragmatist position to conclude my comment on his work. Chapter 5 will place this 'poststructuralist turn' in context by looking at the work of some key figures in theory and philosophy who have contributed to the so-called 'Modernity/Postmodernity' debate.

## Poststructuralist theories

It is useful to begin this discussion on poststructuralism by revisiting Saussure's theory of language, as discussed earlier. This theory proposes that the linguistic sign consists of two elements, a signifier and a signified, with the link between these two elements being arbitrary – a product of linguistic convention ("there is a *definite agreement* on the particular system of terms to be used and on how they are used"<sup>86</sup>) – and differential (language is structured as a system of differences, where what one word *is* is dependent as much on what it is not).

The arbitrary link between word sound and word concept is not of course to point out anything particularly radical but, as Ellis emphasises, it is "the second sense of 'arbitrary' that is really interesting ... for Saussure went on to say that *the concept itself* is an arbitrary creation of language and does not necessarily exist outside that language" (p. 45). Word concepts achieve their meaning not by corresponding to things in the world but rather by the place they take within the language system and by their differentiation from each other. It is where critics head off from this point that becomes interesting in poststructuralist theories.

Drawing on such theory, (formalist) structuralist critics, as I have discussed, perceived the workings of language to be a closed system, making possible a systematic (scientific) account of those workings and thus preserving a certain stability of meaning. Structuralist critics, such as Barthes and Culler (in their early work) and Wall and Hunt, therefore sought to explain how the structures/codes underlying literary texts produced meaning. However, in highlighting the absence of an extra-systemic presence to validate meaning (meaning is instead a product of convention and difference in a language system), the epistemological consequences of structuralist theory effectively eroded the authority of the structuralist critics' own claims to knowledge, the apparently *meaningful* structures they themselves put forward.

As many poststructuralist critics have emphasised, the descriptions of the linguistic structures uncovered by structuralist theory are themselves linguistic constructs and not

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<sup>86</sup> Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*, p. 50. Further references will be in the text.



objective accounts. The "structurality of structure", as Derrida states, therefore limits the "play of the structure" and itself become an extra-systemic validating authority.<sup>87</sup> For the poststructuralist Derrida, meaning is therefore both differential (a product of difference in a language system; meaning is generated by a difference from what is not meant) and *deferred* (there is no extra-systemic presence or authority to *permanently* fix and validate meaning).<sup>88</sup>

Such statements require some unpacking and clarification for, as emphasised at the beginning of Chapter 1, while poststructuralist critics "start from the pluralism of language games and forms of life, not all agree that this is an *irreducible* pluralism of *incommensurable* language games".<sup>89</sup> It is *where* critics strike out on the path from this point that needs careful exposition.

### **Myths about poststructuralism (or some of the extremes of a caricatured poststructuralism)**

The purpose of this discussion then, is not to point to some caricatured notion of a 'Derridean endless free-play of meaning' (a 'play of signifiers that cannot be halted') as is frequently levelled at Derrida's position and Derridean deconstruction.<sup>90</sup> (This is not to deny, however, that at times such notions have been espoused by some proponents of Derridean deconstruction.) "Otherwise", Derrida states, "one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or encouraging others to say, just anything at all".<sup>91</sup> As Ellis emphasises,

[a]rbitrariness ... refers not to randomness but to ... the fact that there is a *definite agreement* on the particular system of terms to be used and on how they are to be used. It does not mean that the meaning of a given *word* is arbitrary, for unless that word has a place in a system of terms, there is no system, no agreement, no meaning, and thus no language and no communication. (p. 50)

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87 *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), trans. Alan Bass, p. 278.

88 Derrida's concept of '*différance*' captures both Saussure's notion of difference (that language is structured as a system of differences) and the notion of deferment of meaning. See Derrida's essay on "Différance" in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-160.

89 *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Baynes *et al.*, p. 7.

90 As Norris makes the point, "[d]econstruction is preoccupied with the central questions of meaning, reference and truth ... It is a flat misreading of deconstruction that sees it as merely suspending these issues in favour of an infinitized 'free play' of language devoid of logical rigour or referential grasp", *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 227.

91 *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 144-145. Derrida further comments, "I never proposed 'a kind of all or nothing choice between pure realization of self-presence and complete free-play or undecidability'. I never believed in this and I never spoke of 'complete freeplay'" (p. 115).

Nor is the purpose of this discussion to suggest that 'everything is language' and that 'there is nothing outside of the text',<sup>92</sup> reductionist arguments that are again often levelled (again sometimes deservedly) at Derridean poststructuralism. Derrida has also pointed to the "stupidities" of such notions.<sup>93</sup> As Ellis observes, "Saussure's replacing the traditional pairing of words and things with a triad of sounds, concepts, and reality represents a *redefining* of the way words relate to the world, not an abolition of that relationship" (footnote 36; p. 48, emphasis added). A concept such as 'warmth' is a creation of language but this does not mean, Ellis continues, "that warmness has nothing to do with reality or that statements that include references to warmness are only statements about the English language, not about the world" (p. 48). "*It is just as wrong to say that warmth is simply a fact of nature*", he emphasises, "*as it is to say that warmth is simply a fact about language*"; and the greatest error of all would be to assume that the falsity of the first of these alternatives required us to turn to the second" (p. 49).

Certainly some of Derrida's early commentators, in pursuing Saussure's argument, frequently do take up an extreme and reductionist position assumed in strong opposition to some caricatured concept of realism (the naive illusion that reality is directly present to the mind and passed on by language without being shaped or altered by it). As Ellis rightly suggests, this is to contest "a view of meaning that by now would have to be counted a very naive and uninformed one" (p. 38)<sup>94</sup> and one that "has been under attack

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92 Derrida states, "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*", *Of Grammatology*, p. 158. This phrase has frequently been mistranslated as "there is nothing outside the text". As Derrida comments, this phrase "which for some has become a sort of slogan" has been "badly understood", *Limited Inc.*, p. 136.

93 Derrida has stated that he frequently receives "critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words – and other stupidities of that sort", "Deconstruction and the Other", in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton and Jacques Derrida - The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 123. "Certainly deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed" (p. 123), Derrida continues, "[b]ut to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference ... does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language" (pp. 123-124). Further, in *Limited Inc.*, Derrida comments, "I do not believe I have ever spoken of 'indeterminacy', whether in regard to 'meaning' or anything else" (p. 148).

94 By way of example, Ellis (p. 36) points to statements by Frank Lentricchia, "Derridean deconstruction ... uncovers those rules governing the production of all Western philosophical discourse which would attempt to establish the signifier as a transparency yielding an unobstructed view of a privileged and autonomous signified (truth, reality, being)", *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 177, and Terence Hawkes, "[the] 'science of signs' has demonstrated that the sign-system of language does *not* act simply as a transparent window on to an established 'reality'", *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 146. Similarly, Geoff Moss comments of child literature, "[t]echnique and structure are backgrounded so that the message of the text is conveyed through an apparently neutral or transparent medium which allows the utmost identification with the author's intention ... Such texts assume a form of innocence, especially about the medium of language, on behalf of the reader who is invited to accept, without question, an established relationship between signifier and signified", "Metafiction and the Poetics of Children's Fiction", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1990), p. 50.

and the subject of intense discussion for a very long time" (p. 37). (I discussed something of this in Chapter 1 in terms of the reaction against so-called 'classic realist' texts.) However, poststructuralism goes beyond the simple refutation of a naive referential theory of language, beyond Ellis' definition of it as simply looking "skeptically at traditional ideas" (p. 78).<sup>95</sup>

Nor is this discussion to suggest that, because Derrida questions a 'logocentric' tradition (the 'metaphysics of presence') of philosophical reasoning and logical analysis<sup>96</sup> and in arguing his position *draws on that tradition of reasoning and logical analysis* (as he inevitably must), he falls into a paradoxical, self-refuting, 'end of philosophy' stance.<sup>97</sup> As Bernstein observes, while at times "Derrida's rhetoric would lead us to believe that we can once and for all make a total break or rupture with the metaphysical tradition" (and many of his followers and critics have interpreted him in this way), Derrida "repeatedly tells us that such a total break does not make any sense".<sup>98</sup> Derrida states that:

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95 Ellis' comments about poststructuralism (and particularly Derridean deconstruction), while a good corrective to some fairly overblown statements about this body of theory, are often themselves finally reductionist.

96 The concept of 'logocentrism' refers, not uncontroversially, to a dominant tradition of Western philosophical thinking that posits the existence of fixed meanings guaranteed by an extra-systemic presence. The concept of logocentrism is therefore based upon what Derrida (following Heidegger, as I will discuss later in this chapter), calls the 'metaphysics of presence', that is, a belief in a permanent extra-systemic validating presence (subject, consciousness, structure), origin, ground or centre of authority that fixes linguistic meaning but is itself beyond scrutiny. Such a centre or presence places a limit on the play of signifiers by making them subject to a 'transcendental signified' (an extra-systemic presence). Logocentrism also characterises attempts to define concepts such as reality, truth, meaning and knowledge with a concept of 'being' underpinned by 'binary oppositions/either-or distinctions (hierarchical oppositions that construct Western philosophy/metaphysics). The meaning of one term of an opposition depends on what it is not, the other term ('supplement') of the opposition that it excludes. Such oppositions (adult/child, for example) can be analysed as each constraining elements of the other, as differences that have been manipulated into hierarchies. But Derrida is not concerned here with simply a reversal of hierarchies.

97 Habermas is one of Derrida's major critics in this regard, see "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida's Critique of Phonocentrism" and "Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature", *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 161-184 and pp. 185-210 respectively. Habermas argues that Derrida's "totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction" (p. 185). Habermas rightly observes I think, of at least some of Derrida's early work and some early poststructuralist work, that "the self-referential critique of reason is located everywhere and nowhere, so to speak, in discourses without a place, [rendering] it almost immune to competing interpretations. Such discourses unsettle the institutionalized standards of fallibilism; they always allow for a final word, even when the argument is already lost: that the opponent has misunderstood the meaning of the language game and has committed a category mistake in the *sorts* of responses he has been making" (p. 337). (I will discuss Habermas' comments on Derrida in Chapter 5.)

98 *The New Constellation*, pp. 182-183. Bernstein also comments that to read Derrida in this way "would only be to replicate what he is constantly exposing – as if 'metaphysics' itself is now the negative term in a binary opposition which is to be condemned, excluded, exiled" (p. 183). Similarly, Norris suggests, "[t]his is not to say – far from it – that Derrida succeeds in breaking altogether with 'Western metaphysics' ... In fact deconstruction is always, inescapably, bound up with that same ubiquitous system of concepts and categories which it claims to reveal in the texts of 'logocentric' thinkers from Plato to Saussure", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 199.

[t]here is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.<sup>99</sup>

Concepts can be regarded as lacking any secure referential ground – with rhetoric privileged over reason, and metaphor over concept – but such a position can only be understood, explained and developed by referring to the philosophy that conceptualises 'rhetoric' and 'metaphor'.<sup>100</sup>

Derridean deconstruction therefore operates within a double constraint,<sup>101</sup> "double bind"<sup>102</sup> or "double refusal", as Simon Critchley suggests, "both of remaining within the limits of the tradition and of the possibility of transgressing that limit ... deconstructive thinking occurs at the disruption and interruption of the limit that divides that inside from the outside of the tradition".<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Norris observes that there is "the necessity of thinking these distinctions through with the maximum degree of analytical clarity and rigour" and "the obligation to remark those points in the discourse of philosophic reason where metaphor turns out to elude or exceed the compass of any such self-assured project. But in fact what is involved is not so much a contradiction as a double gesture of fidelity".<sup>104</sup> Derrida unsettles "the presumed deep foundations of philosophic discourse.

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- 99 "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in *Writing and Difference*, p. 280. Similarly, he also states, "the idea that we might be able to get outside of metaphysics has always struck me as naive ... we cannot really say that we are 'locked into' or 'condemned to' metaphysics, for we are, strictly speaking, neither inside nor outside", "Deconstruction and the Other", p. 111.
- 100 See Norris, "criticism cannot stop short at the point of simply inverting ... deep-laid categorical distinctions ... our operative concepts of metaphor ... rhetoric, figural language and so forth have been produced and refined within a history of thought whose terms are inescapably marked or inflected by the discourse of philosophic reason ... any suggested alternative will always involve a covert appeal to distinctions – like that between 'concept' and 'metaphor' – which are so far from breaking with the language and resources of Western philosophy that they reproduce its characteristic features at every turn", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 154.
- 101 Poststructuralism is not therefore a rejection of structure. While the poststructuralist concept of *différance* (deferred meaning) is finally incompatible with and undermines the structuralist concept of convention (codes, rules, systems), the structuralist concept of convention ensures that poststructuralist theories, underpinned by the concept of *différance*, are always in a double bind. "If expression *always and everywhere* exceeds the limits of structural analysis", as Norris observes, "still there is no escaping the obverse conclusion: that expressive signs can only acquire meaning as elements in a pre-given structural economy of differential terms and relationships", *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 101.
- 102 See Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 148. Derrida also speaks of a "dual gesture" (p. 152).
- 103 *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 20. As Derrida comments, "'deconstructive' writing ... must inevitably partition itself along two sides of a limit and continue (up to a certain point) to respect the rules of that which it deconstructs", *Limited Inc.*, p. 152.
- 104 *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 156. "What Derrida seeks to bring out", Norris continues, "is the deep and unavoidable complicity between Western metaphysics and the various efforts – ... his own included – to think the limits of that tradition", p. 199.

But he does so in the knowledge that there is no getting 'beyond' metaphysics, no language that would not be in some sense complicit with the language it seeks to deconstruct".<sup>105</sup> John Caputo comments in this regard that "Derrida does not think that you can 'circumvent' metaphysics ... He advocates not circumvention but intervention ... making some space, creating an opening".<sup>106</sup> Against this background and building on Derrida's work, Bernstein and Norris take a strong stance against Rorty's critique (itself building on Derrida's work) of the concept of philosophy and philosophical argument/logical rigour, although they agree with Rorty that there are problems with a *foundationist* philosophy and that philosophy has tended not to acknowledge its own rhetorical constitution. (I will discuss this issue in Chapter 5.)

And again, nor is it the purpose of this discussion to caricature the 'individual subject' ('self', 'consciousness'), as have some critics and proponents of poststructuralism alike, as 'a site of the endless play of difference'. Poststructuralist theory regards the individual subject as an effect of/mediated by structure (institutional, linguistic, cultural, historical) rather than its centre or point of origin, and as constructed and self-divided rather than self-present and unified. Once more, however, it is how critics variously move out from and develop this point that is of interest. As discussed earlier, just as "Saussure's replacing the traditional pairing of words and things with a triad of sounds, concepts, and reality represents a redefining of the way words relate to the world, not an abolition of that relationship" (Ellis, footnote 36; p. 48), so too can poststructuralism be viewed as a *redefinition* of the relationship between linguistic concept, the world and the self rather than an abolition of that relationship (the dissolution of the subject into 'endless language games'). Again, there are problems with being drawn into an 'either-or-ist' position here, that if we question the concept of the individual subject, we must reject the concepts of human experience and agency altogether (either the subject is constituted in and by language or the subject is the absolute source of truth, knowledge and meaning). Rather, what poststructuralism emphasises is the contradictions in the concept of a pure unmediated consciousness, a perfect and immediate self-knowledge, and a unified subject.

Finally, poststructuralism is frequently represented as heralding 'the end of truth claims': that with poststructuralism, 'ethics and politics fall',<sup>107</sup> 'history is a fictional construct'

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<sup>105</sup> Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 200.

<sup>106</sup> "On Not Circumventing the Quasi-Transcendental: The Case of Rorty and Derrida", in *Working through Derrida*, ed. Gary B. Madison (Madison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 165.

<sup>107</sup> Bernstein makes the important point that, while there is "scarcely anything resembling a straightforward analysis of such concepts as right, good, obligation, justice, and virtue" in Derrida's work, he "does have an ethical-political 'position'" and that there is "a way of reading Derrida's texts so that we can see his ethical-political horizon pervading and influencing virtually everything he has written", "Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Derrida", *The New*

(constructed out of the various discourses that compete for ascendancy from one generation to the next)<sup>108</sup> and 'relativism reigns', but again each of these claims is overstated.

Bernstein and Norris<sup>109</sup> strongly defend Derrida's work against the more radical kind of claims made for it that I have been discussing here.<sup>110</sup> Norris maintains that Derrida's work has laid "increasing stress on [the] need to conserve what is specific to philosophy, namely its engagement with ethical, political and epistemological issues that cannot be reduced *tout court* to the level of an undifferentiated textual 'freeplay'"<sup>111</sup> and Bernstein argues a similar point, "Derrida is not advocating that we abandon all authority, but rather that we never cease questioning it".<sup>112</sup> I want to conclude with a statement by Derrida to consolidate my comments here:

within interpretive contexts ... that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently almost unshakeable, it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigour, criticism, and pedagogy ... I have never 'put such concepts as truth, reference, and the stability of interpretive contexts radically into question' if 'putting into question' means contesting that there *are* and that there *should be* truth, reference, and stable contexts of interpretation. I have – but this is something entirely different – posed questions that I hope are radical concerning the possibility of these things, of these values, of these norms, of this stability (which of its essence is always provisional and finite). This discourse and the questioning attuned to its possibility ... evidently no longer belong simply ... to the order of truth, of reference, of contextuality. But they do not destroy it or contradict it ... Their 'truth' is not of the same order as the

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*Constellation*, p. 173. He suggests that Derrida's critique of metaphysics is "primarily ethical-political" – it is the "invidious and pernicious tendency toward hierarchy, subordination, and repression that informs his rhetoric and tropes" (p. 176) – and concludes that Derrida is "certainly declaring and clarifying his intentions" (p. 188). Similarly, Critchley points out that, despite the argument "that all discussion of ethics is philosophically anachronistic and at the very antipodes of Derrida's thinking", Derridean deconstruction "can, and indeed should, be understood as an ethical demand", *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. xi. See also Kearney on "Derrida's Ethical Re-Turn" in *Working Through Derrida*, ed. Madison, pp. 28-50. (This is not to deny, however, that in his early work, Derrida did appear to negate ethical-political critique.) As Chapter 5 will discuss, that poststructuralism has rejected the seriousness of truth claims and lacks explicit ethical and political commitment is somewhat overstated.

108 See Wright on the anti-historical, 'either-or-ist' tendencies that are in evidence in some poststructuralist writing, "History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction", in *Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (Edward Arnold: London, 1984), pp. 83-96. Wright states that this "tendency must be resisted" but not because historical approaches are "somehow more truthful or 'correct' than unhistorical ones" (p. 87). There is no foundational discipline – neither history nor science – but this is not to dismiss the claims of 'history' altogether.

109 The essays in Norris' *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), for example, are "intended to rescue deconstruction ... from the various forms of misunderstanding that would blunt its genuinely critical edge" (p. 10). See also his "Ten Slogans in Search of an Author" in *Reclaiming Truth*, pp. 222-230; "Limited Think: How Not to Read Derrida", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, pp. 134-163; and "Deconstruction versus Postmodernism", *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 32-51.

110 See also, although not discussed here, Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

111 *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory*, pp. 12-13.

112 *The New Constellation*, pp. 183-184.

truth they question, but in pragmatically determined situations in which this 'truth' is set forth they must submit ... to the norms of the context that requires one to prove, to demonstrate, to proceed correctly, to conform to the rules of language and to a great number of other social, ethical, political-institutional rules, etc.<sup>113</sup>

This brief discussion has raised a number of highly complex issues, issues that need to be further unpacked and clarified. This will be the concern of the following chapter. Before I turn to Fish's most recent work in concluding this chapter, I want to place Derrida's poststructuralist approach in a broader context.

### **Derrida, Heidegger and Husserl: poststructuralism as a critique of phenomenology**

Poststructuralism is part of a long tradition of questioning foundations. In his critique of the Western philosophical tradition Derrida was influenced by the phenomenological work of Husserl<sup>114</sup> and by Heidegger's own 'revisionist' phenomenological position (in turn influenced by Husserl).<sup>115</sup> I want to therefore briefly consider Derrida's critique of Husserl and the contribution of Heidegger (this is to omit of course discussion of many other important contributors to the questioning of foundations). My discussion will be necessarily brief in the limited scope of this thesis.

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This may seem to some to be moving a very long way from child literature and critical theory on that literature, with the shift in focus from Hunt to Fish to Culler to Bernstein to Derrida and now to Heidegger taking what might appear to be an unnecessarily broad scope: what have Fish, Culler, Bernstein, Derrida and Heidegger got to do with child critical theory? This, however, is exactly the viewpoint with which this thesis, by adopting such an approach, seeks to engage and open up for question.

Poststructuralism represents a major development in contemporary critical theory and philosophy. Its theories have clearly been influential on the major contemporary critics of child literature, such as Hunt, Stephens, Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein. This thesis has therefore argued the need for a re-reading of child critical theory *in the context* of this development in broader criticism, theory and philosophy. However, in exploring what merits questioning in the assumptions that inform child critical theory, it is impossible to

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113 *Limited Inc.*, p. 146 and pp. 150-151.

114 See Derrida's *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*.

115 See Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) and *Writing and Difference* which situate Heideggerian thought in the linguistic contexts of Saussurean theory. For Derrida's discussion of the similarities and differences between his work and Heidegger's, see *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

quarantine developments in broader criticism, theory and philosophy from similar inquiry. In this way, my thesis seeks to move towards a more comprehensive and critical understanding and appreciation of *both* child critical theory and critical theory in general. Further, while child critical theory is bound up with developments in broader critical theory (just as surely as feminist theory is bound up with these developments), it also stands aside (as does feminist theory) as an implicit critique of aspects of these developments.

Feminist theory has brought to broader criticism, theory and philosophy not only a vital awareness of gender issues (particularly as relating to 'the woman'/women question but more generally to the 'gender role-ing' process) in terms of ethical/political and epistemological concerns but also insights on issues that are part of *all* critical discourse, such as the subject, reason, truth and reality. Similarly, child critical theory leads one to ask of the theories and philosophies of Rorty, Habermas, Norris, Bernstein and so on, where is the awareness of age issues (particularly relating to 'the child'/children question but also more generally to the 'age role-ing' process) in terms of ethical/political and epistemological concerns? This would appear to be a substantial gap in broader criticism, theory and philosophy and provides an opportunity to further open up dialogic space.

Hence, my thesis is titled for 'other' literatures in acknowledgment of what child literature – feminist literature, post-colonial literature – and the critical discourses on those literatures can bring to 'mainstream' literature and its critical discourse in both standing apart/being kept separate from the 'mainstream' (as a critique, as different) and in being bound up with/part of the 'mainstream' (as complementary, as same). Both developments have much to bring to and gain from each other, a point that has often been missed. (I will develop this discussion further in the next chapter.)

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Derrida's critique of Husserl's idealist (transcendental) metaphysics<sup>116</sup> highlights how the notion of an undivided immediacy of consciousness able to obtain an objective knowledge of the world (the notion of grounding the possibility of certainty in a conception of the individual subject as a detached knower of objects) is problematised in Husserl's work when the role of language is acknowledged:

since the possibility of constituting ideal objects belongs to the essence of consciousness, and since these ideal objects are historical products, only appearing

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<sup>116</sup> For a detailed study on Derrida and Husserl see Critchley and Timothy Mooney, "Deconstruction and Derrida", in *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophers*, ed. Kearney, particularly pp. 450-460, and Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*, pp. 203-208. See also Allison's introduction to Derrida's, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, pp. xxxi-xlii.



thanks to acts of creation or intending, the element of consciousness and the element of language will be more and more difficult to discern. Will not their indiscernibility introduce nonpresence and difference (mediation ...) in the heart of self-presence?<sup>117</sup>

Self-consciousness of the world is dependent upon the representation by language of something that cannot be made fully present. The intervention of language as a necessary means of communication and knowledge therefore defers the possibility of a pure unmediated consciousness and a pure simultaneity in the re-presentation of ideas. Derrida states that "phenomenology seems to us tormented, if not contested from within, by its own descriptions of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity. At the heart of what ties together these two decisive moments of description we recognize an irreducible nonpresence as having a constituting value" (p. 6).

That there is no unified, self-present, unmediated subject and no timeless, unchanging objects of knowledge challenges the traditional oppositions between subject and object, idealism and realism, by which individuals and the world have often been understood. This brings me to Heidegger. That Derrida is influenced by Heidegger is clearly apparent from Derrida's work (I will leave it to others however to debate the nature of Derrida's debts to Heidegger and differences between their positions<sup>118</sup>). Heidegger is a key figure in the tradition of questioning of foundations<sup>119</sup> and it is important to discuss his work in this thesis, albeit briefly.<sup>120</sup>

An excellent introduction to Heideggerian thought is provided by Charles Guignon, from whom I quote here in full:

Heidegger's insight [in *Being and Time*] is that many of the knots in thinking that characterize philosophy are due to a particular way of understanding the nature of reality, an outlook that arose at the dawn of Western history and dominates our thought to this day. This outlook is ... the view that what is ultimately real is that which underlies properties – what 'stands under' ... and remains continuously present throughout all change. Because of its emphasis on enduring presence, this traditional ontology is also called the 'metaphysics of presence' ... Ever since Descartes, this substance ontology has bred a covey of either/ors that generate the so-called problems of philosophy: either there is a mind or everything is just matter;

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117 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 15. (Further references will be in the text.)

118 For detailed studies on Derrida and Heidegger see Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*; Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Herman Rapaport, *Heidegger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); and Charles Spinosa, "Derrida and Heidegger: Iterability and Ereignis", in *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 270-297.

119 See Heidegger's *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962).

120 For detailed studies on Heidegger see amongst others *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, eds. Dreyfus and Hall and particularly *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

either our ideas do represent objects or nothing exists outside the mind; either something in me remains constant through change or there is no personal identity; either values have objective existence or everything is permitted.<sup>121</sup>

Heidegger challenges the concepts of an isolated subject and an independently existing world of objects, claiming that the notions of subject and object have resulted from a philosophising, a theoretical mindset, that is distant from concrete, lived existence. This 'theoretical stance' is an artificial isolating perspective and is not the only perspective. As Guignon observes, Heidegger puts to one side the assumption "that there is such a thing as a mind or consciousness, something immediately present to itself in introspection, which must be taken as the self-evident starting point for any account of reality" and "start[s] out from a description of ourselves as we are in the midst of our day-to-day practical affairs, prior to any split between mind and matter", beginning from the specific, local sense "we have of ourselves as caught up in the midst of a practical world" (p. 6). To emphasise his divergence from the Cartesian viewpoint, Heidegger describes how things show up for us most *basically* in our everyday existence. The "world of average everydayness" is not an "aggregate of 'present-at-hand' objects, things that just occur", Guignon states of Heidegger's position, but a "holistic contexture of relations, the 'ready-to-hand', where what something *is* – its 'ontological definition' – is determined by its role within the projects [activities] under way" (p. 10).<sup>122</sup> Hence, there is no pure, outside vantage-point where we can withdraw so as to gain a disinterested presuppositionless view of things.

Heidegger's concept of 'being human' (his term is 'Dasein') therefore opposes the traditional Cartesian duality of a mind located within a body, of a 'Being' reflecting on its own being/human existence. Instead of an object or thing, human existence is presented as a temporal event, an happening unfolding in time – unfolding in a (conventional) cultural, historical and linguistic context (implying a shared intelligibility). Hence, it is not subjects or objects that emerge as most basic or significant but the clearing into which "specific forms of human existence along with particular sorts of equipmental context emerge-into-presence in their reciprocal interdependence". "Entities in general", Guignon continues, "can show up *as* what they *are* ... only against the background of the interpretive practices of a particular historical culture" (p. 13).

The world shows itself around us as a field of practical involvement, within which human concerns are already implicated. Before the individual subject can establish awareness and knowledge of the world, it is already *in* the world (a world always already there). There

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121 *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Guignon, p. 4. Further references will be in the text.

122 "Left and right", Heidegger states, "are not something 'subjective' for which the subject has a feeling; they are directions of one's directedness into a world that is ready-to-hand already ... whenever Dasein has such a 'mere feeling', it is in a world already *and must be* in it to be able to orient itself at all", *Being and Time*, p. 143.

is no ultimate foundation for the web of meaning that makes up being-in-the-world. And knowledge/interpretation is never without presuppositions. It is not simply a mirroring of an objectivity that stands before us. This is to touch on the notion of the 'hermeneutic circle' – that, as I discussed earlier in Chapter 3, there is no interpretation/understanding without presuppositions,<sup>123</sup> we are always caught up in a 'hermeneutic circle': "we can first discover something as significant in some determinate way only because we have soaked up a 'pre-ontological understanding' of how things in general can count through being initiated into the practices and language of our culture" (Guignon, p. 14). There must always be a context of intelligibility for a discovery to be made: "[w]henver something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us".<sup>124</sup>

A 'turn' in Heidegger's writings after *Being and Time* is frequently commented upon (although there is some debate about the nature of this turn and the point at which it occurs in his work which I will not enter into here). In his later work, as Guignon observes, Heidegger sought to move away from the notion of human existence "as the source of the intelligibility of things" to the notion of "thinking the 'history of being', where humans and their modes of understanding are themselves treated as offshoots of a wider historical unfolding" (p. 15). There is a parallel here between the concepts of 'being' and 'language'. What we say is always preshaped by the conventional and historical structure of language. Similarly, our human existence (our actions and thoughts) is arranged and guided by the understanding embodied in the practices of our historical culture. Heidegger sees the history of metaphysics as concealing this process. Hence 'being' and 'language' (the mediums/conditions that make it possible for things to show up in the first place) are concealed and the entities themselves – 'beingness' and objects – are privileged. The French poststructuralist reception of Heidegger, which brings us back to Derrida, is largely based upon an interpretation of this turn in Heidegger's work as a *linguistic* one.

The possibilities in Heidegger's thought for later development/critique by poststructuralists are clear. Heidegger questioned the presupposition that there is a pure unmediated consciousness (prior to linguistic structure) and a pure simultaneity in the representation of ideas. He challenged the Cartesian way of thinking of human beings as isolated subjects contemplating an external objective world (a way of thinking that separated subjects from the world in which they exist), emphasising instead the 'being-in-the-world' of human existence. Heidegger also highlighted that the view we form of ourselves is influenced/distorted by our personal interests and conditioned by historical

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<sup>123</sup> I will return to this area again in Chapter 5 when I discuss Gadamer's work.

<sup>124</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 191-192.

context, there is no neutral, transcendental 'I' underpinning acts of consciousness.

### **The poststructuralist/neo-pragmatist Fish<sup>125</sup>**

With his essay, "Interpreting the *Variorum*" (1975, pp. 147-173) and the introduction of the concept of 'interpretive communities', Fish shifts to a more overtly poststructuralist position.<sup>126</sup> First, the objectivity of the text goes. The 'formal patterns' evident in the text, Fish argues, do not exist independently of readers but rather, are the *product* of readers' interpretative strategies.<sup>127</sup> This suggests a potential dislodging of the text as the source of authority in favour of the reader/critic. Next, however, goes the subjectivity of the reader. These interpretive strategies, as Fish emphasises, are not the reader's "in the sense that would make him an independent agent". Rather, they proceed from an interpretive community of which that reader is a member; they are socially constructed. Interpretive strategies are "community property" and "since the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community ... as the meanings it enables him to produce" (p. 14). Meanings, Fish concludes, are the property "neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers" but of "interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (p. 322). He suggests that "[a]t a stroke the dilemma that gave rise to the debate between the champions of the text and the champions of the reader ... is dissolved because the competing entities are no longer perceived as independent" (p. 14). The reader can never be outside an interpretive community (as an isolated individual) and the text can never be objective because it is never not interpreted. We are all situated somewhere and that situation always brings with it constraints.

Against this background, Fish argues that the only way remaining for critics to 'argue a case' is through persuasive rhetoric, all foundational claims to a higher knowledge/truth, to factual evidence based upon logic and reasoning, having been questioned:

there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only 'ways of reading'

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125 I will omit further discussion in this thesis of Culler's increasing theoretical commitment to a poststructuralist position through to the publication of *On Deconstruction* as I have already touched upon some aspects of that re-positioning. Broadly, Culler no longer seeks to map the system of conventions underlying the institution of literature (although he is not led into a fully neo-pragmatist position on 'interpretive communities' like Fish) but focuses instead on the breakdown of system.

126 "The crucial step [is] to see that the claims of neither the text nor the reader can be upheld, because neither has the independent status that would make its claim possible. That step is taken in 'Interpreting the *Variorum*,' in which the text and the reader fall together" (p. 12).

127 Fish states, for example, "I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to ... demarcations *in* the text; those demarcations are then available for the designation 'formal features', and as formal features they can be (illegitimately) assigned the responsibility for producing the interpretation which in fact produced them" (p. 163).

that are extensions of community perspectives. Once I saw this, the judgement that I was trying to persuade people to a new way of reading was no longer heard as an accusation because what I was trying to persuade them *from* was not a fundamental or natural way but a way no less conventional than mine and one to which they had similarly been persuaded ... The business of criticism ... was not to decide between interpretations by subjecting them to the test of disinterested evidence but to establish by political and persuasive means ... the set of interpretive assumptions from the vantage of which the evidence (and the facts and the intentions and everything else) will hereafter be specifiable. (p. 16)

Criticism is therefore "no longer a matter of demonstration but a matter (endlessly negotiated) of persuasion" (p. 17).

Fish's position here has come under heavy critique. One issue raised most frequently is how he is able to talk about different interpretive communities from a seemingly objective meta-critical position, and therefore on what grounds his theory could be said to be valid. (This also calls into question the status of his meta-critique of other critics' interpretive strategies, such as Iser's.) Fish cannot effectively respond to this criticism in view of his claim that there can be no demonstration of his argument, only persuasion. Fish's work has also been subject to criticism for failing to show what ethical/political interests, and historical and social contexts, are involved in the existence of interpretive communities.<sup>128</sup> The notion of interpretive communities is reductive of the highly complicated nature of society and cultures. Such communities are more complex than this model allows, for people belong to many different interpretive communities (divided by gender, age-role, class, culture, ethnicity, geography) and often conflicting interpretive communities. (This was also my critique of Hunt's use of the notion of 'child/adult interpretive communities'.) Critics have also questioned the consistency of Fish's position on the individual subject,<sup>129</sup> as well as the logical rigour of his position<sup>130</sup> (for while Fish highlights the formation of readers by pre-existing conventions, his argument lacks a sophisticated theoretical elaboration of the concept of interpretive communities).

In his later work,<sup>131</sup> Fish expands his argument that interpretation always depends upon

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128 Tompkins observes (not uncontroversially) that the "net result of this epistemological revolution is to repoliticize literature and literary criticism. When discourse is responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference", "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", p. xxv. See also Freund, "Fish's position so far has refused to face up to the ways in which the authority of interpretive communities might become grimly coercive" (p. 110).

129 See Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", p. xxiii.

130 See Peter J. Rabinowitz, "since any given listener or reader will always interpret (that is, produce) the argument of the critic from the perspective of his or her *own* interpretive community, it is not clear how a different perspective could persuade the listener to change – or even how it could be recognized", "Other Reader-Oriented Theories", in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Selden, p. 400.

131 *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in*

the conventions of an interpretive community and that the conventions of interpretive communities are themselves without ultimate grounding. In this way, Fish re-emphasises his position that theory can only *persuade us rhetorically* to change our beliefs and not through any claim to theoretical cogency or truth based on an external viewpoint (the idea that we can get outside prevailing consensus norms through self-critical reflection to see where our beliefs are inadequate).<sup>132</sup> Fish's major assault is therefore on standards of truth/validity based on a viewpoint apparently independent of prevailing consensus norms. Instead, he argues that what comes to be accepted as true/theoretically valid is a matter of current cultural consensus. What an interpretive community chooses to accept as valid or true is just what happens to work for present suasive/rhetorical purposes. Fish's most recent work launches a complex area of debate. He has been accused of relativism, for example, but he is (like Rorty) perhaps more 'anti-foundationalist' than relativist.<sup>133</sup> However, as the following chapter will discuss, there is a scope of positions within anti-foundationalism,<sup>134</sup> and Fish's<sup>135</sup> and Rorty's approaches have come under heavy critique.

I have spent some time on Fish's work not because he is necessarily a key figure in contemporary theory and philosophy but because his work provides a useful background against which to consider and, more importantly, problematise Hunt's position on language and meaning, ethics and politics, and the (child) subject, a position that Hunt has shaped partly with reference to Fish's work. I will leave Fish's work in the next chapter to focus on Rorty's more complex engagement with and sophisticated steering between relativism and neo-pragmatism.

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*Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

132 This in turn enables Fish to dismantle the notion of theory having 'consequences'. To be persuasive to our interpretive community, theory can only rationalise beliefs that must always already be in place.

133 Anti-foundationalism denies the possibility of grounding any proposition in reality or an absolute principle of value, knowledge or truth. However, the anti-foundationalist view that the truth cannot be known for certain (that all beliefs are socially constructed so that knowledge and truth are contingent) is different from the relativist view that there is no such thing as truth or that all beliefs are equally true and there are no rational grounds for preferring one from another.

134 Horace Fairlamb, for example, suggests that Fish takes up an *extreme* anti-foundationalist position: "Fish's error follows from the conventionist's aim to reject strong foundationism with something equally strong ... which then becomes equally reductive", *Critical Conditions: Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 38.

135 Norris, for example, argues that Fish ignores how prevailing consensus beliefs may encounter "real obstacles, whether in the form of empirical counter-evidence, theoretical inconsistencies [or] textual aporias", "Right You Are (If You Think So): Stanley Fish and the Rhetoric of Assent", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 111. He also maintains that Fish disregards the "presence of ideological motives or interests" (p. 112), resorts to a simplistic notion of rhetoric that isolates it from logic and grammar and excludes "any possible relation to cognitive or truth-seeking interests" (p. 116) and discounts all ideas of "critical (as opposed to consensus) accountability" (p. 117). See also Fairlamb's critique of Fish on similar grounds, "Fish's Strong Conventions", *Critical Conditions*, pp. 23-56.

## To conclude?

I could close by finalising my conclusions on the reader-response theories, of various descriptions, that have been of concern in this chapter: Chambers' phenomenologically-inspired theory, Wall's structuralist narratological theory and Hunt's evolving structuralist-poststructuralist theory. Freund, for example, states that, in the context of poststructuralist critique and the 'poststructuralist turn' more generally, 'reader-response' criticism has, "a past rather than a future" (p. 10). While I agree with Freund that there are problems with so-called 'reader-response criticism' in that there are no such clear-cut distinctions to be made between 'reader-subject' and 'text-object' – it is not possible to resolve this impasse – I do not agree that this means it is *impossible* to discuss the reader-subject and the concepts of human experience and agency altogether.

I would suggest that Freund's statement that 'reader-response criticism' has "a past rather than a future" is rather more applicable to the *term* itself, 'reader-response (or 'reader-oriented') criticism', than to the scope of such criticism (its interest in the reader-subject). First, this term is a poor and misleading one in that it suggests the sole reliance upon the primacy of a 'reader-subject'.<sup>136</sup> However, it is not the emphasis on the reader-subject that is a problem per se. Second, such a term does not reflect the complex, careful and insightful work undertaken by recent critics (feminist critics, for example) who have sought to recover some concept of the individual subject or 'self' while at the same time acknowledging problems with that concept and its attendant implications for meaning and interpretive authority. And third, such a term tends to blanket the 'reader-oriented' theories of Iser, Prince, Barthes, Fish and Culler (and therefore by attribution, the theories of Chambers, Wall and Hunt) as all-problematic and offering very little. Freund speaks, for example, of "a deconstructive conversion that discovers the innate *impasses* and *impossibilities* of theories of reading that privilege the subject as a source of literary meaning, or take for granted the *foundational* validity of something called the reading 'experience'" (p. 72, emphasis added). The question here, as it has been throughout this thesis, is does there have to be *either* an absolute foundation (something objective and stable called the 'reading experience') *or* absolute scepticism (that we are faced with "impasses and impossibilities" of theories of reader)? In this way, Freund implies that there can only be the *impossibility* of theories of the reader-subject and reader experiences.

Unlike Freund, I want to keep open my conclusions on the range of theories that have explored human experience and agency. In the interests of this, I will postpone my

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<sup>136</sup> The term 'reader response' is also inaccurate in terms of phenomenological criticism's attention to the interaction *between* reader and text and the way such criticism switches back in a contradictory way to uphold the primacy of the text-object. This suggests why perhaps Hunt coined the term 'childist' criticism rather than referring yet again to some kind of 'child reader-oriented' criticism.

conclusions on the approaches of Chambers, Wall and Hunt until I have further explored the work of some contemporary critics who, in wanting to open up space to pursue a questioning of foundations, have sought to avoid being drawn into Freund's either-or-ism. This chapter on these so-called 'reader-response'/'reader-oriented' approaches has been important ground work because, to quote one of Freund's more even-handed statements, such criticism can be seen as a "smaller probe" within a "larger nexus" which "entails a reopening ... of the question of the *authority or grounding force* we desire to claim for the negotiations of our meanings or our knowledge. (p. 18, emphasis added). It is exactly these questions that I want to explore in the following chapter.



## **Part Three**

### **Issues in Contemporary Criticism, Theory and Philosophy**

## Chapter 5

### Towards a More Comprehensive and Critical Account of Language and Meaning, Ethics and Politics, and 'the Child' and Children/'the Reader' and Readers

#### Contemporary/poststructuralist theories: the question of foundations

Perhaps the most persistent feature of continental philosophy, through all its multiple mutations, is a commitment to the *questioning of foundations*. From phenomenology to deconstruction, one encounters the persuasion that the old foundationalist arguments no longer suffice. Meaning is not some metaphysical essence or substance; it is a task of intersubjective and intertextual relations. Truth cannot be grounded on a given system of being (realism) or mind (idealism); it must be radically rethought as an interplay of differences.<sup>1</sup>

There are many of us who think that the achievement of the 'postmodern' movement is to open up the space for new styles and genres of critique that avoid the extremes and twin dangers of [a] grand Either/Or. But is this so? Is there a new way of understanding and practicing critique that escapes this grand Either/Or? ... This is – if not *the* central question – then at least *a* central question that is at the very heart of 'modern/postmodern' debates.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary theorists, in wanting to open up space to pursue a questioning of foundations, have sought to avoid being drawn into the "Cartesian Anxiety", that either there is a fixed foundation for our knowledge or the conviction that there is such a foundation is a self-deceptive illusion. As Bernstein suggests, "this dichotomy [is] misleading and distortive. It is itself parasitic upon an acceptance of the Cartesian persuasion that needs to be questioned, exposed, and overcome".<sup>3</sup> Frequently, as I will discuss, such theorists offer some kind of *clarifying statement* of their position explicitly distancing themselves from an 'either-or' stance, in order to elaborate a more comprehensive and critical theory of understanding and interpretation.

I want to review a series of these position-clarifying statements in the contemporary child literature theories of Hunt, Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephens, in the theories of Bernstein, Rorty, Habermas, Gadamer and Norris (I also want to draw on the work of Taylor, Davidson, Foucault and Levinas, having discussed Derrida in the previous chapter), and in the feminist theories of such critics as Butler, Haraway and Flax.

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<sup>1</sup> Kearney, "Introduction", *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy*, ed. Kearney, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 8. Further references will be in the text.

<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 19. See also Robert Hollinger and David Depew, "overly objectivistic, or 'foundationalist', epistemological criteria are, by their very unfulfillability, the main cause of the skeptical temptations into which philosophers regularly fall", "General Introduction", *From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, eds. Hollinger and Depew (Westport: Praeger, 1995), p. xiv.

Part Two of this thesis pointed to the need for further exploration of contemporary/poststructuralist developments in child critical theory and broader theory and philosophy. These developments are important not only, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, for opening up the discussion on key issues such as the subject, meaning, truth and reality but also in opening up dialogic space to pursue a questioning of foundations while seeking to avoid being drawn into 'either-or-ism'. My position coincides with these theorists in that I agree there are more interesting questions to be raised in the space between the extremes of the arguments often taken on these issues. My aim is to engage with the positions of these theorists and to develop, *in dialogue* with them, a more comprehensive and critical account of the concepts that have been my concern throughout this study: language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. The notion of dialogue – opening up dialogic space – will take on increasing significance as I seek to map out in this chapter a dialogic/rhetoric of disruption<sup>4</sup> approach.

Part Three therefore brings child literature theory into dialogue with the theories of Rorty, Bernstein, Habermas, Norris, Gadamer, Butler and Haraway and *vice versa*. Again, the aim is not to group these together in some overarching theoretical perspective but to look at ways in which these approaches complement and are in tension with each other. Chapters 5 and 6 provide a re-reading of child critical theory in the context of this broader theory and philosophy, and ask what merits questioning both in child critical theory and broader theory and philosophy. In this way, I want to move towards a more comprehensive and critical appreciation/understanding of the insights of both areas – to emphasise that each of these approaches has much to *gain from* and *give to* the other.

This critique of child literature and child critical theory is therefore undertaken in the context of the current reappraisal of the founding assumptions of modern Western social, ethical, political and cultural theory that forms the so-called 'Modernity'/'Postmodernity' debate.

### **The 'Modernity'/'Postmodernity' debate**

It is essential to provide a brief overview of this debate to clarify a number of contentious issues before I proceed.

The idea of 'the Enlightenment' "has increasingly become the battleground for disputes over the concept of reason and the progressive or oppressive character of the heritage of European Culture", providing the focus for debates between Habermas and Foucault (and their followers) in which both Habermasian and Foucauldian critics "understand the

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<sup>4</sup> The term is Bernstein's (p. 157), as I will later discuss.

Enlightenment as the project of 'Modernity'<sup>5</sup> – that is, both sides tend to fix the meaning of Modernity (for Habermasian critics an emancipatory notion and for Foucauldian critics a repressive notion) through its association with the unfinished project of the Enlightenment.

For theorists like Habermas<sup>6</sup> who wish to reconstruct, reinterpret or reform the Enlightenment ideal of a rational society, Modernity (in what stands *for now* as an extremely reductive definition) reflects the Enlightenment notion of emancipatory social and political change achieved through the progressive operations of human reason. Postmodernists, however, broadly contest such a position or are positioned as (wholly) contesting it.<sup>7</sup> While Habermas (in agreement with Foucault) admits that reason is inescapably *situated*,<sup>8</sup> he maintains, as Thomas McCarthy points out, that this does not invalidate the distinctions between truth and falsity, and right and wrong:

[the] undeniable 'immanence' of the standards we use to draw these distinctions – their embeddedness in concrete languages, cultures, practices – should not blind us to the equally undeniable 'transcendence' of the claims they represent – their openness to critique and revision and their internal relation to intersubjective recognition brought about by the 'force' of reason. The ideas of reason, truth, justice *also* serve as ideals with reference to which we can criticize the traditions we inherit; though never divorced from social practices of justification, they can never be reduced to any given set of such practices.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodernity, as reflected in the work of Foucault and others, instead links claims about social life, human nature and the concepts of knowledge, reason, truth and validity with strategies of power.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Foucault emphasises that this "does not mean that one has to be 'for' or 'against' the Enlightenment":

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5 Peter Osborne, *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), ed. Payne, p. 175.

6 See, for example, Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Habermas upholds the project of modernity: "I think that instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of these extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity", "Modernity – An Incomplete Project" (1980), rpt. in *Interpretative Social Sciences: A Second Look*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 153. However, it is important to stress here that Habermas in his most recent work denies that he is "advocating a linear continuation of the tradition of the Enlightenment", "Special Issue on Critical Theory", *Theory, Culture and Society*; quoted by William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 137. (I will comment further on Habermas' work later in this chapter.)

7 As I will discuss, there is more to be said here for 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' are something of a false dichotomy and it could be argued that thinkers such as Habermas and Foucault seek more to *problematise* the concepts of 'the Enlightenment' and Modernity/Postmodernity. Hence, Foucault is not an 'anti-modernist' and Habermas is not in an *uncritical* supporter of 'modernity'.

8 Habermas, as I will discuss, is concerned with communicative reason and not with "the idealism of a pure, nonsituated reason", *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 322. "The reason operating in communicative action", he emphasises, "stands under ... external, situational constraints" (p. 325).

9 "Introduction" to Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. x.

10 Foucault's 'genealogy critique', for example, assumes a close link between discourses and institutions/social practices, and seeks to show that discourses (particularly those that carry public

[i]t even means precisely that one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad).<sup>11</sup>

Foucault challenges the concept of the transcendental subject as the locus of meaning but without dismissing all mention of 'human agency' (without suggesting that the 'subject' is *only* the result of the impact of power/knowledge regimes); explores the links between power and knowledge (emphasising that frameworks of knowledge and ways of understanding are always changing); and questions the Enlightenment idea that (scientific) reason can contribute to a political agenda of social change.<sup>12</sup> However Foucault's interpretation of the Enlightenment is far from straightforward, particularly in this last aspect. As Kenneth Baynes *et al.* have observed, Foucault maintains that "we cannot altogether escape from regimes of power/knowledge into some transcendental realm of freedom and truth, but can only move from one regime to another". While he implies that an individual cannot therefore stand outside of a system of power as the voice of reason, knowledge and truth, a *specific* individual might take up a *local* struggle against a present regime.<sup>13</sup> Foucault does not therefore exclude questions about freedom and liberation but in fact emphasises the need to "grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take".<sup>14</sup>

This then would appear to bring Foucault and Habermas closer together rather than further apart, haggling over finely graduated scales of emancipatory social and political change (over whether each makes small claims or large claims, and emphasises the developments of reason or the distortions of reason) interacting with finely graduated

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authority and regulate identities, selves and communities) conceal certain social interests and power relations and mould human life by naturalising the construction of personal and social identities: "[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity". Genealogy seeks to "re-establish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations", "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 79 and p. 83.

11 "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow, p. 43.

12 Foucault is in turn influenced by Nietzsche's work, particularly his concepts of 'genealogy' and the 'will to power'. For detailed studies on Foucault's work see, amongst others, C. G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Lois McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 1994); *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Kelly; Bernstein, "Foucault: Critique as a Philosophic Ethos", *The New Constellation*, pp. 142-171; and *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). While I will not be engaging with Foucault's work in depth in this thesis, many of the theorists, with whose work I will engage, have been influenced by his arguments.

13 "Michel Foucault: Introduction", *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Baynes *et al.*, pp. 97-98.

14 Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", p. 46.

definitions of the concept of reason ('thin' definitions and 'thick' definitions,<sup>15</sup> and 'weak' and 'strong' concepts<sup>16</sup>). Accordingly, critics of Habermas (in supporting Foucault) and critics of Foucault (in supporting Habermas) have often been quick to press the apparently self-contradictory nature of Habermas' and Foucault's work. They have pushed such work into making larger claims for its arguments where perhaps smaller claims are made and 'thicker' definitions of its terms where perhaps 'thinner' definitions are made (therefore driving Habermas and Foucault into more extreme positions),<sup>17</sup> rather than emphasising, as do Bernstein and Gary Gutting, the discursive space that Habermas and Foucault have opened up, and the different questions they have raised. As Bernstein makes the point, "instead of claiming that Foucault is flatly contradicting himself on the question of the subject, truth and freedom, we can read him in a different way – as deliberately using hyperbolic rhetorical constructions in order to compel us to disrupt and question our traditional *understandings* of these key concepts" (p. 155).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Gutting states, "my suggestion is not that Foucault thinks he has philosophical grounds

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- 15 Because of their 'thin' definitions of reason, for example, postmodernists are often criticised for undertaking a totalised critique of reason that appears to undermine the capacity of reason to be critical. Hence Habermas' criticism of Foucault that Foucault has fallen into performative self-contradiction by using the tools of reason to criticise reason: "[Foucault's] investigations are caught exactly in the self-referentiality that was supposed to be excluded ... if the truth claims that Foucault himself raises for his genealogy of knowledge were in fact illusory and amounted to no more than the effects that this theory is capable of releasing within the circle of its adherents, then the entire undertaking of a critical unmasking of the human sciences would lose its point", *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 279. Foucault responds to this type of critique by pointing to the "blackmail" of having to declare oneself to be for or against the Enlightenment (that Habermas is pushing him into an 'either-or' stance), "What is Enlightenment?", p. 43.
- 16 Interestingly, in his most recent work, Habermas states that he seeks to "make plausible a *weak* but not defeatist concept of linguistically embodied reason", *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), p. 142.
- 17 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, for example, suggest that Foucault's work "oscillates between totalizing and detotalizing impulses ... destroying the subject and resurrecting it, assailing forms of domination but eschewing normative language and metadiscourse. He sometimes attacks the Enlightenment and modern theory *in toto* while at other times aligning himself with their progressive heritage. His later positions seek a cultivation of the subject in an individualistic mode that stands in tension with the emphasis on political struggle by oppressed groups", *Postmodern Theory: Critical Investigations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 73. Similarly, Fairlamb argues that "Foucault has failed to reconcile his own general theorizing with his critique of totalizing theories and his rubric of localism [his advocacy of local criticism, the individual's local struggle]", "Foucault's Microphysical Politics: Big Brother is Missing", *Critical Conditions*, pp. 183-184. See also Norris: "[w]hat interests me more is the odd disjunction – the lack of theoretical fit – between Foucault's highly effective practice as a critical intellectual and the way that he persistently ... deploys every means, in his more speculative writings, to render such a practice untenable. For those writings could be seen to undermine the very ground – the very conditions of possibility for critical discourse – on which he nonetheless and *necessarily* claimed to stand when pursuing his other (historically and politically oriented) lines of research", "What is Enlightenment?": Kant According to Foucault", in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gutting, p. 177.
- 18 See also Nancy Fraser, "Foucault's critique ... is not an attack on the notions of freedom and reason per se. It is rather a rejection of one contingent, superseded philosophical idiom or discursive formation in which those values have lately found expression", "Michel Foucault: A Young Conservative", in *Critique and Power*, ed. Kelly, p. 192.

for rejecting the very idea of a true theory, but that he is concerned about values theories may have quite apart from questions about their ultimate truth".<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, both Foucault and Habermas acknowledge that reason is situated, and seek (not always successfully) to avoid crude 'either-or' distinctions about the critique of reason, to evade the binary oppositions of domination/liberation and universalism/relativism. The issue then is *where* they take this point. The debate between Foucault and Habermas would appear to centre around the fine positions that can be taken around the question of the "capacity of reason to be critical",<sup>20</sup> a point to which I will shortly return.

The two terms – Modernity and Postmodernity – vary according to different usages, making definitions such as those offered above highly problematic. While I have therefore preferred not to use these confusing terms in this thesis, the debate about Modernity/Postmodernity (in all its various guises) lies behind much of the discussion in this thesis.

## SECTION ONE

### 'Poststructuralist' child literature theorists: Hunt, Stephens and Lesnik-Oberstein

Returning to my introductory discussion, it is useful to list some of these position-clarifying statements, turning first to statements by three contemporary child literature theorists<sup>21</sup> (I have quoted these theorists at some length because these statements are central to the discussion in this chapter):

Hunt –

we have to assume a certain congruence between what you see and what I see and what a child-reader sees; otherwise the whole business of making books (and, especially, talking about them) becomes a nonsense. There must be a middle ground of common-sense agreement about what meaning is;<sup>22</sup>

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19 "Introduction – Michel Foucault: A User's Manuel", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gutting, p. 19.

20 A phrase used by McCarthy; see his Introduction to Habermas' *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. xvii.

21 Citing these positions in this form might appear to invite the criticism that I am reflecting on these critics' work in a way that is reductive and potentially distorting. However, I will engage more fully with these critics' work in Chapter 6.

22 *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*, p. 89.

I will assume, then, that the subject exists as an individual, but that existence is within a dialectical relationship with sociality<sup>23</sup> ... so also I think it necessary to argue that narrative fictions have a referential meaning and are constructed with the intent of shaping reader responses ... This position is often questioned on various grounds: by critics who are inclined to locate meaning only in the reader's responses; by Derridean critics, who deny that texts have centres of meaning; and by some materialist 'critical linguists', who locate meaning 'within the context and situation of the text and the institutions that determined its production and reception.' A continuing problem at the heart of the debate is that we can never really know what happens when a reader reads, and this is exacerbated when the reader is a child ... I am nevertheless ... going to insist on the existence of some elements of determinable meaning (p. 48); and

[c]ritics known as (Derridean) deconstructionists are interested in multiplicity of meaning as the reflection of the unstable, dynamic attributes of all meaning – textual and extra-textual (strictly speaking there is no 'extra-textual' to deconstruction)<sup>24</sup> ... ideas from, and about, deconstruction (or actually from Freud and Nietzsche, who have both been an influence on deconstruction in particular respects) impinge on my approach to 'childhood' and 'adulthood' in this book (p. 22) ... Barthes strives towards not fixing meaning, and I believe we can never, despite this striving, not fix meanings at some level – in this I agree with Nietzsche. Derrida also differs from Barthes ... However, although readings of Derrida and like-minded theorists thus support the theoretical context and perspective of my examination of 'children' and children's fiction criticism, I am not engaged in a Derridean deconstruction of these terms. (p. 32)

Hunt and Stephens have undertaken significant work in child literature theory and offer important statements here. I have difficulties however with some aspects of their positions. As I have discussed, Hunt's concept of "a middle ground of common-sense agreement about meaning" is not elaborated upon or engaged with in any fully critical sense and his position is sometimes inconsistent. And, while Stephens would appear to engage with theoretical issues in more detail than Hunt, I have difficulties with his lack of discussion about areas that are essential to the theoretical content of his study. "It is not my aim here or elsewhere in this book", Stephens states for example, "to engage in a discussion of theories about the crucial concept of the 'subject'. Instead, I will assume a position that has been extensively articulated and defended by others, and attempt to explore its implications for works of children's fiction and the readers of these fictions" (p. 47). He draws upon work of two theorists<sup>25</sup> but his failure to articulate and defend these theorists' positions to any detailed extent, as well as to fully articulate his difficulties

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23 Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, p. 47. Further references will be in the text.

24 *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, p. 21. Further references will be in the text.

25 Stephens cites the work of Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), particularly Chapters 1 and 5, and John Smith, "The Transcendence of the Individual", *Diacritics*, no. 19 (1989), particularly pp. 83-85.



with those theorists with whom he is in dispute ('reader response', 'Derridean' and 'linguistic' critics) and so move beyond reductive statements about such work, is of concern. Having said this, however, Stephens' work and his statements here are significant in the context of child critical theory. (I will return to Stephens' approach in more detail in the following chapter. I will also have more to say about Hunt's approach.)

Lesnik-Oberstein's position is articulated in more theoretical detail than Hunt's. However, despite her carefulness in seeking to avoid 'either-or-ist' statements – "deconstruction" has "frequently been misrepresented", it does not "strive towards the nihilism of 'everything means everything, therefore nothing means anything', as is so often claimed" (p. 21) and "[n]either is deconstruction an obfuscated form of liberal humanist 'close reading' as some critics have claimed" (pp. 21-22) – a number of critics would be concerned with her final somewhat lumping assessment of 'Derridean deconstruction' as falling into "extreme idealism".<sup>26</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein therefore pushes deconstruction into an extreme position, pointing towards a caricatured notion of a 'Derridean endless freeplay of meaning' (with terms such as 'the child') where there is 'nothing outside of the text' and 'everything is language' (linguistic idealism). She arguably employs this strategy to retrieve the middle ground of reasonable argument for herself:

I do not pursue or formulate this discussion with an eye to fulfilling what I take to be the ultimate demands of Derridean philosophy. Derrida and other philosophers and literary theorists 'write', despite their disavowals of 'writing' ... In writing, in the narrow sense, Derrida argues, we recognize and repress "the absence of the 'author' and of the 'subject matter', interpretability, the deployment of a space and time that is not 'its own'", but we ignore the fact, he says, that "everything else is also inhabited by this structure of writing in general, that 'the thing itself always escapes'".<sup>27</sup> Thus Derrida is the first to admit he is subject to Nietzsche's 'necessary lie' of creating a world not of becoming but of being, but this does not deter him from examining the terms of his own, and other, 'lying'. I am selectively applying this perspective in arguing that the child is written, discursive, textual; but I am not attempting to pursue the deconstruction of all the terms of the 'closure of the game' to the full. (pp. 32-33)<sup>28</sup>

Lesnik-Oberstein implicates a Derridean deconstructionist position with a paradoxical (self-refuting) position – an *untenable position*. She also fails to perceive that the 'double bind' that Derridean deconstruction highlights and within which it works ('*double bind*'

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26 See her reference to "the extreme idealism of such a philosophy as deconstruction" (p. 33).

27 Lesnik-Oberstein quotes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak here, on and quoting Derrida. Spivak's full statement is: "[t]he usual notion of writing in the narrow sense does contain the elements of the structure of writing in general: the absence of the 'author' and of the 'subject-matter', interpretability, the deployment of a space and time that is not 'its own'. We 'recognise' all this in writing in the narrow sense and 'repress' it; this allows us to ignore that everything else is also inhabited by the structure of writing in general, that 'the thing itself always escapes'" (Spivak quotes Derrida from his *Speech and Phenomena*), "Translator's Preface", Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. lxix.

28 As I will later discuss, there is some ambiguity here about whether Lesnik-Oberstein does in fact succeed in *selectively* applying this perspective.

rather than self-refutation and contradiction) is essentially the definition of her own position, the terms within which she has worked: "I am *selectively* applying this perspective in arguing that the child is written, discursive, textual" (p. 33, emphasis added). Lesnik-Oberstein is therefore very careful with her own terms and in clarifying her own position but arguably does not finally extend this care to deploying 'Derrida' and the term 'deconstruction'. For all this, however, Lesnik-Oberstein's approach is an important one and I will return to it in the next chapter.

While my position on child literature, as I will clarify through this chapter and the next, is influenced by the significant work of these and other contemporary child literature critics (particularly Rose), I would like to turn to some further position-clarifying statements that are of relevance to this discussion before I come back to their work. My intention by the close of Chapter 6 is to have brought my discussion of child critical theory into dialogue with the contemporary/poststructuralist/feminist theories to which I will now turn – to look at parallels and divergences between child critical theory and this broader theory.

## SECTION TWO

### Poststructuralist theorists<sup>29</sup>

Again, it is useful to list some position-clarifying statements from a series of poststructuralist theorists, statements that also contain references to the importance of a dialogic approach:

Bernstein –

[c]ritical engaged dialogue requires opening of oneself to the full power of what the 'other' is saying. Such an opening does not entail agreement but rather the to-and-fro play of dialogue (p. 4);

[w]e seem then to be drawn into a grand Either/Or: *either* there is a rational grounding of the norms of critique *or* the conviction that there is such a rational grounding is itself a self-deceptive illusion (p. 8) ... This specious 'either-or' closes off ... that [which] needs to be opened for discussion (p. 165) ... The 'logic' of my argument is Both/And rather than Either/Or. This Both/And exhibits unresolved, perhaps unresolvable tensions and instabilities (p. 201) ... The problem ... is to live this perpetual uneasiness in a way which we 'gesture in opposite directions at the same time (p. 215);

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29 There are some difficulties in applying this label 'poststructuralist' to the diverse contemporary approaches I want to discuss. However, I need a general term for the practical purpose of referring to this group of theorists (another term I might perhaps have used is 'anti-foundationalist'). I acknowledge the problems with such terms, labels and categories.

Norris –

[i]t is the same dichotomizing habit of thought – the predilection for starkly exclusive 'either/or' choices – that leads [critics] to veto all talk of reference, reality, or truth on account of the problems that are seen to arise with any simplified, positivist approach to such issues;<sup>30</sup>

['either-or-ist' theory] fails to take account of the crucial difference between truths imposed by arbitrary fiat, through presumptive access to *the Truth* as revealed to some authorized body of priests or commissars, and truth-claims advanced in the public sphere of open argumentative debate;<sup>31</sup>

Habermas –

[h]istory is projected and made by subjects who find themselves in turn already projected and made in the historical process ... *society* appears to be an objective network of relations that is either set ... above the heads of subjects ... or is generated by them ... the subject either finds itself centred on its body ... or is related eccentrically to itself, regarding its body as an object ... Thought that is tied to the philosophy of the subject cannot bridge over these dichotomies but ... oscillates helplessly between one and the other pole<sup>32</sup> ... Agreement arrived at through communication, which is measured by the intersubjective recognition of validity claims, makes possible a networking of social interactions and lifeworld contexts (p. 322);

Rorty –

[t]he real difficulty we encounter here is, once again, that we are trying to set aside the image of man as possessor of a Glassy Essence, suitable for mirroring nature with one hand, while holding on to it with the other<sup>33</sup> ... hermeneutics is an expression of hope (p. 315) ... Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. This hope is not hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but *simply* hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement (p. 318); and

Gadamer –

[t]he [hermeneutic] circle ... is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the communality that binds to the tradition<sup>34</sup> ... [i]t is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and

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30 *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 202.

31 *What's Wrong Postmodernism*, p. 289.

32 *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 317. Further references will be in the text.

33 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 123. Further references will be in the text.

34 *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 261. Further references will be in the text.

gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on the subject. (p. 347)

As in the previous chapter, where I sought to open up a series of reductive statements concerning the concepts of meaning, reality, the subject and so on, I now want to build on my conclusions in that chapter with reference to the critics mentioned above,<sup>35</sup> particularly concerning the following broad areas of discussion: the conduct of critique and the concept of reason; the notions of truth, knowledge and reality, and philosophies of language; and ethical and political engagement and a dialogic/rhetoric of disruption approach. Rather than discussing first one critic and then the next, I have sought to open a dialogue between these critics' different critical stances in regard to these three areas of discussion.

### **The conduct of critique and the concept of reason**

*The conduct of critique: to engage in critique is to have a position that is in some sense rationally grounded, warranted and affirmed (Bernstein and Norris)/no ultimate foundations = no philosophy and no basis for logical argument (Rorty)*

Bernstein comments that the "very 'grammar' of critique seems to presuppose some measure or standard, some basis for critique". However, as he rightly observes, because "there has been so much skepticism about appeals to standards and 'foundations'" – because poststructuralist theories have frequently been (mis-) perceived as undermining any privileged position from which we can engage in critique – this has called into question "the very intelligibility of the concept of critique" (p. 144). (Hence, the tendency for contemporary critics to provide position-clarifying statements that set out the basis for their critique in the context of such epistemological scepticism.) Bernstein brings out the absurdity of this position well, pointing to the 'either-or-ist' stance that many critics have taken in defending/opposing the concept of critique: "[i]t seduces us into thinking that we are confronted with only two possibilities: either there are universal ahistorical normative foundations for critique or critique is groundless" (p. 165).

Building on Derrida's work, Bernstein and Norris therefore take a strong stand against Rorty's critique of the concept of 'philosophy' and philosophical argument/logical rigour.<sup>36</sup> "I thought it too much of 'deconstruction'", Rorty states, "that it be *both*

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35 I have not included Derrida in my group of critics under discussion as I have already commented on his work in the previous chapter. Bernstein, Rorty and Norris have all been influenced by aspects of Derrida's work.

36 While also drawing on Derrida's work, Rorty instead emphasises the significant role 'new vocabularies', 'rhetoric' and 'poetic acts' play in questioning the well-defined boundaries between the disciplines of philosophy and literature (I will turn to this important aspect of Rorty's position later) and highlights the problems that philosophy has had in acknowledging its rhetorical

'rigorous argument within philosophy and displacement of philosophical categories' ... Something, I claimed, had to go. I suggested that we jettison the 'rigorous argument' part". He concludes that "[p]oetic world-disclosers" like Derrida have to "pay a price", and "part of that price is the inappropriateness to their work of notions like 'argumentation' and 'rigor'".<sup>37</sup>

While both Norris and Bernstein agree with Rorty that there are problems with a *foundationalist* philosophy and that philosophy has "tended to bypass the problems of coming to terms with its own textual or rhetorical constitution",<sup>38</sup> contrary to Rorty, they both argue that philosophy cannot be collapsed into a generalised notion of rhetoric and defend Derrida against such a charge. Derrida is showing the "genre-distinction between these categories" (literature-philosophy) to be resting on "a series of unstable oppositions (concept/metaphor, literal/figural, constative/performative, reason/rhetoric, etc) whose structural economy is none the less prerequisite to any discourse, his own included, that attempts to think beyond their more traditional or typecast formulations".<sup>39</sup> This is therefore "*not* to say, with Rorty", Norris concludes, "that philosophy should hence forth be treated as just one 'kind of writing'".<sup>40</sup> Bernstein makes the point that we need to distinguish between two senses of metaphysics:

[t]here is that sense of metaphysics where we think we can finally reach some luminous transcendental signified ... or absolutely stable ground that ... serves as a basis for permanent hierarchies and rigid boundaries. But there is another sense of metaphysics or the metaphysical impulse in which all thinking, speaking and writing necessitates ... making distinctions with their inclusions and exclusions". (p. 183)

While agreeing with Rorty about the dangers of sliding from the second sense of metaphysics here to the first, Bernstein is critical of him for falling into an 'either-or-ist'

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constitution. Hence the title of Rorty's essay, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing", *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 90-109). See Norris' response to Rorty's essay, "Philosophy is *Not* Just a 'Kind of Writing': Derrida and the Claim of Reason", in *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory*, ed. R. W. Dasenbrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 189-203.

37 "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?", in *Working Through Derrida*, ed. Madison, pp. 137-138 and p. 142. To support his argument, Rorty has to maintain a questionable distinction between Derrida's 'early work' and 'later work'. Derrida's early work, where he "used words like 'rigorous' a lot", is regarded by Rorty as "something of a false start", whereas Derrida's later work is "moving away from the academic, 'standard rules of philosophy' manner of his early work" (p. 146). Rorty is seeking to push Derrida into one position here, while arguably Derrida is both 'inside and outside philosophy'. Bernstein argues that Rorty "imposes a false grid on Derrida so that the 'later' Derrida becomes the supreme ironist" (p. 286).

38 Norris, *The Contest of Faculties*, p. 11. Norris is also sympathetic to Rorty's emphases on 'play, metaphor and the poetic': "[l]iterary theory (at least since the advent of deconstruction) has made these problems its peculiar concern, and in this sense has moved into regions of enquiry closed off to 'philosophy' as such" (p. 11). Hence, he agrees with Rorty that Derrida's work, in drawing attention to the rhetorical aspects of language, does challenge philosophy's claims to a pure, unmediated truth and logical argument.

39 Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 153.

40 Norris, *The Contest of Faculties*, p. 11.

stance on this first sense of metaphysics, for maintaining that *all* philosophy/metaphysics seeks an absolutely stable foundation and fixed Archimedean point so that we might as well give up philosophy<sup>41</sup> and therefore dismissing this second sense of metaphysics out of hand. In doing so, Rorty misses the space opened up by some theorists (including Derrida) to enable the conduct of philosophy or *critique*.

Contrary to Rorty's claims for Derridean deconstruction then, Derrida does maintain that there are important distinctions to be made between philosophy and literature, and between logic and rhetoric:

[d]econstruction, as I have practiced it, has always been foreign to rhetoricism ... and this despite or rather because of the interest I have felt obliged to direct at questions of language and at figures of rhetoric. What is all too quickly forgotten is ... that deconstruction, that at least to which I refer, *begins* by deconstructing logocentrism, and hence also that which rhetoricism might owe it. Also for the same reason, I never assimilated philosophy, science, theory, criticism, law, morality, etc., to literary fictions.<sup>42</sup>

While also agreeing with Rorty that *foundationalist* philosophy is problematic, like Bernstein and Norris I would question why we need to get rid of *philosophy* altogether once it is rid of appeals to fixed permanent foundations. (However, as I will discuss shortly when I turn to a more detailed commentary on Rorty's work, other elements of Bernstein's critique of Rorty need to be opened up for question. Unlike Bernstein, I feel that something can be retrieved from Rorty's so-called 'relativism'<sup>43</sup> through further exploration of his emphases on 'play, metaphor and the poetic'.)

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty upholds a concept of "conversational justification" as opposed to a "reductive" notion of "justification embedded in the epistemological tradition",<sup>44</sup> that is, one based on universal, ahistorical normative foundations for critique:

[i]f we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice. So holism produces ... a conception of philosophy which has nothing to do with the quest for certainty.<sup>45</sup>

Rorty therefore rejects the quest for certainty and universal foundations. While this does not automatically mean that one is left with complete uncertainty and radical scepticism, it

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41 Bernstein suggests that Rorty writes as if 'philosophy' "should be rooted out and thrown away" (p. 240).

42 *Limited Inc.*, footnote 9, p. 156.

43 It is important here not to slip into the pattern that, as D. Vaden House rightly observes, emerges from much of the critical literature on Rorty: "Rorty is applauded for a brilliant attack on foundationalism and then dismissed as self-contradictory, or self-indulgent", *Without God or His Doubles: Realism, Relativism and Rorty* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 2.

44 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 170.

45 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 171.

is how Rorty's position develops in his later works, such as *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), that particularly concerns Bernstein.

Bernstein's position on Rorty has shifted over time as he perceives Rorty, with these later works, to have moved into a more 'relativist' position. In Bernstein's earlier book, *Philosophical Profiles* (1986), he generally regarded Rorty's work as "powerful and challenging" and defended it from the charge of relativism: "[i]f by relativism we mean that there is no truth, objectivity, and standards for judging better and worse arguments or moral positions, then Rorty is certainly *not* a relativist ... Rorty's aim is not to deny or denigrate 'truth' and 'objectivity' but to demystify these 'honorific' labels".<sup>46</sup> However, in Bernstein's more recent book, *The New Constellation* (1991), he is critical of Rorty for his championing of "the virtues and moral achievements of bourgeois liberal democracy" and of "play, metaphor, and the figure of the poet" (p. 260), and now charges him with relativism: "Rorty clearly *looks* like a relativist for he is constantly telling us there are no neutral criteria for evaluating competing incommensurable vocabularies" (p. 270).<sup>47</sup> Leaving aside for the moment Bernstein's critique of Rorty's championing of "bourgeois liberalism" and "play, metaphor, and the figure of the poet", Bernstein claims that Rorty in his later works at times "'presupposes' that all 'philosophic justification' and all argument boils down to logical deduction from presumably unassailable premises" (p. 244). While Bernstein admits that some philosophers have resorted to such premises, he argues that Rorty's conception of 'justification' is "close to a caricature", shutting out "a more sophisticated and open-textured understanding of justification" (p. 239). He concludes that Rorty seems to think that "any reference to criteria and standards is irrelevant" (p. 242), to talk about standards or criteria is to be "on the slippery slope that leads to 'bad' foundationalism" (p. 241). I agree with Bernstein that there are difficulties with Rorty's work in this regard:

it is only to the extent that we still accept some version of Rorty's mythologizing about what philosophy and metaphysics are, and what 'philosophical justification' *must* be, that his playful skepticism has any sting. Once we give up this 'myth' - once we adopt a more open and playful attitude toward philosophy itself (instead of obsessively trying to kill it off over and over again) - then all the hard issues concerning ... defense and critique ... come rushing in. (p. 253)

Bernstein is right to argue that it does not make sense "to speak of critique without implicitly or explicitly presupposing some 'basis' for the critique - a 'basis' which in

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46 *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in the Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1986), p. 46 and p. 41 respectively.

47 While Bernstein acknowledges that it would be "unfair" to accuse Rorty of a "vulgar relativism", he is concerned that the "nagging problem" of relativism in Rorty's work cannot be removed by simply renaming it "contingency": "[i]t is hard to discern any difference that makes a difference between Rorty's claims about the radical contingency of all vocabularies and what from our entrenched vocabularies is called 'relativism'" (p. 279).

some sense is defended, warranted or affirmed" (p. 144).<sup>48</sup> As he further observes, the inability to give "definitive knock-down foundational justifications" should not be "confused with giving historically contingent fallible reasons to support our beliefs ... We don't need strong foundations in order to assess whether reasons given in specific inquiries are good reasons" (p. 277). This is also a position supported by Norris, although I have some difficulties with Norris' approach.

Norris seeks to defend the validity of argumentative logic and critical rigour against the extremes of an ultra-relativist 'postmodernism' but he sometimes makes his case by taking rhetorical advantage of presenting what he is arguing against in its least defensible version. Norris states, for example, that his study is "aimed against the kinds of ultra-relativist doctrine that have lately been advanced by neopragmatists, postmodernists, 'strong' sociologists of knowledge, and others who seek to cast down the idols of scientific truth and method",<sup>49</sup> and against "the 'vulgar-deconstructionist' view: that logic and rigour are beside the point".<sup>50</sup> While I and many other critics would agree with Norris that a rejection of the notions of logic and rigour is problematic, Norris occasionally resorts to 'lumping criticism'. He sometimes lumps together Rorty and Fish, or all 'postmodernists', 'neopragmatists' and 'poststructuralists',<sup>51</sup> as holding the same relativist position. In this way, he arguably collapses the wide range of contemporary positions that might be assumed into an all-encompassing "ultra-relativism" when he does not need to resort to such tactics.

### *Habermas and the concept of reason*

The concept of reason and the conduct of critique are closely linked. To be critical is to employ reason, to engage in critique is to have a position that is rationally grounded and warranted – or, as Habermas puts it, "[i]f thought can no longer operate in the realms of

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48 More basically, if all rational standards are called into question and undermined by one's critique, then one is immediately caught up in a performative self-contradiction concerning the question of critique, in seeking to practice critique while at the same time undermining the possibility of critique.

49 *Reclaiming Truth*, p. xiii.

50 *The Contest of Faculties*, p. 224.

51 Norris comments, for example, that "the current notion – current at least among Foucauldians, Lacanians, post-structuralists, postmodernists, neopragmatists and a good many liberal-communitarians – [is] that the only alternative to [the] old foundationalist paradigm is an ethics that renounces all Kantian talk of autonomy, principle, critique, maxims of practical reason etc, and which seeks no criteria for moral judgment beyond those supplied by some existing language-game, discourse, or cultural form of life", *Reclaiming Truth*, p. 35. That in 1996, Norris was still making this same point about all 'neopragmatist' and 'postmodernist' theories could be regarded as reductive of the many carefully argued contemporary/poststructuralist positions that are, like his own position, more alert to the pitfalls of assuming an extreme relativist stance.



truth and validity claims, then analysis and critique lose their meaning".<sup>52</sup> Both Bernstein and Norris draw on the work of Habermas,<sup>53</sup> as well as that of Derrida (as discussed in the previous chapter), to support their positions. While Habermas and Derrida are usually understood to have taken different sides in the Modernity/Postmodernity debate, and there certainly are crucial differences between their approaches, I would argue (along with a number of other commentators<sup>54</sup>) that there is a dialectical development in both theorists' work to open up the space between these two terms<sup>55</sup> (I discussed something of this in relation to Habermas and Foucault in my introduction to this chapter).

It is therefore useful to turn briefly to Habermas' work<sup>56</sup> by which Bernstein and Norris have been influenced, to further explore the argument that to engage in critique is to have a position that is in *some* sense rationally grounded, warranted and affirmed. Building on elements of Gadamer's work, Habermas maintains that the nature of language as communication means that the speaker and receiver of language have an over-riding interest in understanding each other, and in "action oriented to reaching understanding, validity claims are 'always already' implicitly raised":

[those] claims (to the comprehensibility of the symbolic expression ... the rightness of the speech act with respect to existing norms and values) are set in the general structures of possible communication. In these validity claims communicative

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- 52 "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", in *New German Critique*, no. 26 (1982), p. 25; quoted in Bernstein, p. 207.
- 53 See Bernstein, "once we give up foundationalism or claims to absolute validity, then we must recognize that all our beliefs are always open to criticism and revision ... [but we remain] open to what Habermas calls the 'force of the better argument' and recognize there can always be disputes about what counts as the better argument" (pp. 280-281), and Norris, "I concur with most of what Habermas has to say", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 49.
- 54 See Bernstein's discussion on this point in "An Allegory of Modernity/Postmodernity: Habermas and Derrida", *The New Constellation*, pp. 199-229.
- 55 Norris observes, for example, that Habermas has "travelled a long way toward acknowledging the force of certain anti-foundationalist arguments", *Reclaiming Truth*, p. 8. Habermas admits to being critical of those "still battling against the 'strong' concepts of theory, truth and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half" (footnote 28, p. 408). More recently, Habermas has suggested that the difference between his work and French poststructuralism has been "quite unnecessarily exaggerated" and is more "a difference of rhetorical styles", "Remarks on the Discussion", *Theory, Culture and Society*, no. 7 (1990), p. 127 and *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, pp. 25-26; as quoted by Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction*, p. 134. Norris has also observed that "deconstruction, properly understood, belongs within that same 'philosophical discourse of modernity' that Habermas sets out to defend", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 52.
- 56 For detailed studies on Habermas see *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Kelly; Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction*; *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), ed. Bernstein; *Habermas: Critical Debates*, eds. John B. Thompson and David Held (London: Macmillan, 1982); and Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (London: Hutchinson, 1978). Works by Habermas of relevance to this discussion include *Postmetaphysical Thinking*; *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*; *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, vol. 1, 1984 and vol. 2, 1987); and *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979).

theory can locate a gentle, but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason, a claim that must be recognized de facto whenever and wherever there is to be consensual action.<sup>57</sup>

Habermas therefore affirms the claim to reason<sup>58</sup> (communicative dialogical reason) inherent in the validity claims "'always already' implicitly raised" in an unconstrained dialogue to which all speakers have equal access (thus defining Habermas' 'ideal speech situation'). If a validity claim is challenged, it can in principle be *justified* by the speaker. Even though this "claim to reason" is "gentle", he argues that it "develops a stubbornly transcending power, because it is renewed with each act of unconstrained understanding".<sup>59</sup>

To make his point, Habermas draws on speech act theory, based on 'communicative competence' (speakers' mastery of the rules for raising/redeeming validity claims in language), where understanding between people is dependent upon the truth of what they say, its sincerity and normative rightness: "[c]ommunicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for ... redeeming claims to propositional truths, normative rightness, [and] subjective truthfulness" (p. 314).<sup>60</sup> In uncoerced agreement, people in dialogue have equal opportunities to deploy speech acts. Habermas therefore looks at how language coordinates action in a consensual/cooperative way as opposed to a forced/manipulated way, and analyses what we mean when we say something is (morally) right, how we could redeem that claim in an ideal conversation. Habermas' point is that everytime we communicate, we raise the possibility of freely achieved dialogic agreement (even while recognising that many things might disrupt that communicative dialogue). Under Habermas' theory of language, the prospect of genuine consensus is inherent in our condition as language users. In this way, he seeks to establish a vantage-point from which a grounded/justified critique of society can take place, a way of distinguishing between distorted communication and legitimate consensus.

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57 *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, p. 97.

58 While not disregarding the powerful tendency of rationality to regulate our lives through socio-political structures, Habermas argues against a pessimistic and repressive picture of Enlightenment rationality – "[i]n their blackest book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno ... conceptualize[d] the Enlightenment's process of self-destruction. On their analysis, it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of enlightenment" (p. 106) – and instead emphasises 'communicative action' and a rationality directed towards mutual understanding and cooperative action through dialogue that seeks to overcome the obstacles that distort communication (as distinct from a rationality directed towards efficiency goals).

59 "A Reply to My Critics", in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, eds. Thompson and Held, p. 221.

60 See, for example, Habermas' "An Alternative Way Out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative Versus Subject-Centred Reason" (pp. 294-326). Habermas builds on "truth-condition semantics" as developed by Davidson and others. "This theory", Habermas states, "arrives at the principle that we understand a sentence when we know the conditions under which it is true" (p. 312).

These validity claims, Habermas admits, have a "Janus face" (p. 322). They are both situated ("raised *here and now*, in specific contexts" [p. 323]) and universal (geared to validity claims that hold beyond a local context, recalling Habermas' claim that they have a "stubbornly transcending power"). Habermas' notion of universal agreement within an ideal conversation (to believe something is right is to believe that one has good reasons to hold that position and that, given time and speakers engaging in uncoerced communication, everyone would come to the same conclusion) comes under frequent and strong critique. As Simone Chambers comments, the "ideal conversation replaces the monological universalization test of categorical imperative with a dialogical [discursive] universalization test".<sup>61</sup> And, as Outhwaite rightly observes,

even if the reality of communicative action is conceded, it is still not clear just what constrains actors to adopt a performative attitude and to engage in communicative action. There is a parallel here to the analysis in philosophical ethics of 'taking the moral point of view', for example recognizing that moral judgements must be universalizable. If actors refuse to take this step, the whole game cannot begin.<sup>62</sup>

In this way, Habermas moves from universality to moral universality. Fairlamb makes a good point here, observing that in assuming the obligation of free inquiry to be always in force, Habermas "confuses what we must do to communicate with what we must do".<sup>63</sup> I will come back to these points shortly.

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas therefore emphasises communicative action oriented towards validity claims admitting of argument and counter-argument (open to scrutiny and critique) – making possible consensus based on the *force of the better argument* – underpinned by the notion of "intersubjective recognition" (p. 314): "[a]greement arrived at through communication, which is measured by the intersubjective recognition of validity claims, makes possible a networking of social interactions and lifeworld contexts" (p. 322). This notion of 'intersubjective recognition' of the validity of another's utterances is an important one for Habermas.<sup>64</sup>

For Habermas, intersubjective recognition of validity claims makes it possible to give historically contingent fallible reasons to support our beliefs and arguments/critique but at

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<sup>61</sup> "Discourse and Democratic Practices", in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. White, p. 233.

<sup>62</sup> *Habermas: A Critical Introduction*, p. 111. Fairlamb makes a similar point, "Habermas believes that his model is progressive because it intends to free up dogmatic impasses. But that merely supposes that we are already committed to his consensus model as a paradigm of rationality rather than to dogmatic first premises", *Critical Conditions*, p. 223. The universality of Habermas' model requires that nothing falls outside that model but if one is not 'playing the game' then one is outside the model.

<sup>63</sup> *Critical Conditions*, p. 227.

<sup>64</sup> It has echoes for me of Davidson's 'principle of charity': "[c]harity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right on most matters", *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 197. I will discuss Davidson's position later in this chapter.

the same time to give reasons that, if I understand him correctly, in some sense transcend (if only in a 'quasi' sense) contingent historical circumstances (have a "Janus face"). A comparison with Rorty's position is useful at this point in clarifying a number of important issues. While Habermas emphasises argument and in particular the 'force of the better argument', Rorty questions the obsession with argument (favouring instead the role of 'new vocabularies'<sup>65</sup>) and emphasises 'what is good in the way of belief': "[a] liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' (or 'right' or 'just') whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter"<sup>66</sup>. For Rorty, there is no non-circular argument for justifying our historically contingent beliefs, contingency 'goes all the way down' (although one needs to be careful here of falling into Norris-like slogans that are not further opened up for discussion):

[t]he residual difference I have with Habermas is that his universalism makes him substitute such convergence [of undistorted communication] for ahistorical grounding, whereas my insistence on the contingency of language makes me suspicious of the very idea of the 'universal validity' which such convergence is supposed to underwrite.<sup>67</sup>

Rorty would seem to suggest that there is no way for us to defend our (truth/knowledge) claims (although I am speaking in somewhat reductive terms here and will have more to say about this point). This moves my discussion into the broader issues of language, truth, knowledge and ethics to which I want to turn in my next section.

To summarise, although there are difficulties with Rorty's position (as I will discuss), there are also major problems with Habermas' approach, particularly his tendency towards (moral) universalism. As Fairlamb rightly observes, Habermas "has found a central paradigm of democratic rationality, but he has not found the only form of social rationality, or one that can always tell us what to do".<sup>68</sup> Habermas' concept of an 'ideal speech situation' (of free speech) cannot be appropriate in every social context because society is more complex. However, this is not to deny that Habermas' model has

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65 "Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague ... is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging ... Such arguments are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for, claims that a better vocabulary is available. Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things ... I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive", *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 8-9.

66 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 67.

67 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 67.

68 *Critical Conditions*, p. 231. Fairlamb continues, "Habermas wants a model that not only *allows* for the mediation of differences; he wants a model that *obligates* a specific, unique procedure for mediating them. This move, however, conflates the logics of *possibility* and *obligation* ... It is perhaps Habermas' central error to mistake the *formal* preconditions of a single practice (communication) and a single social sphere (democratic politics) for a universal *practical* obligation" (p. 214).

ethical/political cogency, that it provides a 'democratic ideal' (consensual decision making) against which to critique narrow theories of democracy/society based on interests of one power/gender/class/age group, and that it offers an important perspective on our use of language. Nor is it to caricature Habermas' stance as proposing that all conflicts can be settled by rational discussion, a charge that is often levelled at his work. Rather, while violence and distortion cannot be eliminated, Habermas suggests that they can be reduced.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, nor is Habermas' concept of an 'ideal speech situation' to naively overlook the ambiguities and contradictions in communicative acts but more to emphasise the possibility of communication taking place in this way. Consensus is a possibility built into the structure of human communication. In this sense, Habermas' approach is 'reconstructive' in seeking to bring out and contribute to the development of our capacities for communicative action.

For all this, I am in agreement with Outhwaite that "Habermas' detailed arguments for the primacy of communicative action are not entirely successful"<sup>70</sup> but it is important to re-emphasise that Habermas is not necessarily shutting out dialogue on the areas in which his work has come in for critique. Further, when placed up against Rorty's 'good in the way of belief' position, I frequently find Habermas' 'force of the better argument' position the more compelling (for all its limitations). Habermas' position is therefore significant for opening up dialogic space (a point to which I will return in my final section) but, as I will now discuss, Rorty's position is also significant in opening up an area of discussion (on the 'poetic') closed down by Habermas and by Bernstein.

### *Rorty, Derrida and the significance of 'play, metaphor and the poetic'*

My final difficulty with Habermas' work, then, is that it is critical of any overemphasis on the 'poetic' rhetorical linguistic function. Derrida's work comes in for particular attention in this regard – "Derrida wants to expand the sovereignty of rhetoric over the realm of the logical in order to solve the problem confronting the totalizing critique of

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<sup>69</sup> This perhaps somewhat answers Habermas' critics, including feminist critics, who have questioned whether 'rational consensus' is possible or even always desirable. Habermas is not necessarily shutting out dialogue on such questions (although he does not actively engage with these questions himself). (Child literature critics might offer a similar critique of Habermas' position: whether, in the context of children and child theorists, 'rational consensus' is possible or indeed always desirable given a hegemony of adult discourse. There are also interesting questions to be asked here of Habermas' approach in this context concerning his notion of 'discursive democracy' and how much this coincides with ideal notions about child raising and language learning.) Habermas accepts the complicity of truth with power and exclusion but argues that this situation is not beyond remediation. This also partially addresses Rorty's critique of Habermas – Rorty wants to replace Habermas' position with an "increasing willingness to live with plurality and to stop asking for universal validity" (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 67) – for Habermas is not necessarily closing off this stance.

<sup>70</sup> Habermas: *A Critical Introduction*, p. 112.

reason" (Habermas, p. 188) – although Habermas is also critical of Rorty's work.<sup>71</sup> Habermas' critique of Derrida's and Rorty's work recalls Bernstein's critique, on similar grounds, of Rorty's "championing" of "play, metaphor, and the figure of the poet" (p. 260). It is on this aspect of Rorty's work that I want to focus in order to open up both Bernstein's and Habermas' critique, for it is here that Bernstein and Habermas are themselves in danger of being drawn into an 'either-or-ist' position in making their case that to engage in critique is to have a position that is *in some sense* rationally ground, warranted and affirmed. I do not perceive that an interest in the poetic, rhetorical and metaphorical destroys this case – that we must choose between one or the other.

While I agree with Bernstein that at times Rorty's position does appear to leave itself nowhere to stand, I would argue, contrary to Bernstein, that Rorty's approach holds important possibilities for opening up productive dialogic space, particularly in his emphasis on play and metaphor, and the novel and poem. Rorty turns to the novel, for example, as something that has the force to make us aware of ethical and political concerns by combining such concerns with play and metaphor:

[f]iction like that of Dickens ... gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of ... Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel ... [has], gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicle of moral change and progress.<sup>72</sup>

As Bernstein observes, "Rorty thinks that novels do have 'force', they do make a difference in how we act in our everyday lives". However, having observed this, Bernstein queries the evidence to support such a claim:

[n]o one need deny that *sometimes* some novels can also inspire one to act in different ways – as part of one's moral education. But why privilege the novel ... especially when one appreciates the ambiguities of the moral stance of novels, and that there seems so little evidence for thinking that even careful readers of novels change the ways that they act in their everyday lives? ... in a society such as ours where there are fewer and fewer readers of novels, it seems little more than a false nostalgia to think that novels can play the role Rorty so desperately wants them to play. (p. 285)

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71 See Habermas on Rorty in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 206. In response, Rorty states of Habermas, "[he] would dislike my claim that a liberal utopia would be a *poeticized* culture. Habermas sees my aestheticizing talk of metaphor, conceptual novelty, and self-invention as an unfortunate preoccupation with what he calls the 'world-disclosing function of language' as opposed to its 'problem-solving function' within 'intramundane praxis'", *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 65-66.

72 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xvi. This is not, however, to ignore problems with how Rorty further elaborates on this position, particularly with his division of actions into "public" and "private" (with private life being associated with irony, metaphor, poetry and so on). On this point, see for example Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?: Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Malachowski, pp. 303-321.

But Bernstein is missing the point here, for it is that "sometimes" which is important.<sup>73</sup> (He also overlooks important and considered work by critics such as Booth in this area – on the issue of 'ethical consequence', for example – as I discussed in Chapter 1. Booth argues that we do not need to quite so categorically dismiss this area, despite "problems of proof that can never be decisively settled" [p. 159], although we do need to be very careful and clear in the theoretical approaches we adopt to explore such issues.) While I agree that there are problems in setting out to overturn hierarchies (privileging literature over philosophy, rhetoric over logic, metaphor over concept, open texts over closed realist texts), in perceiving play with language as automatically ethically and politically progressive, and/or in privileging the novel over other forms of discourse, what I am arguing is that we lose something if we overlook the rhetorical, metaphorical, literary, and poetic dimension of language. The gap between Rorty's and Habermas' position is well summed up by Rorty himself: "[Habermas] wants there to be argumentative practices, conducted within 'expert cultures', which cannot be overturned by exciting, romantic disclosures of new worlds". As Rorty concludes, all that is in question here is "*accommodation* – not *synthesis*".<sup>74</sup>

Alternative approaches acknowledging these aspects of language are important for opening up the traditional discursive boundaries of literary criticism, child literature criticism, philosophy, ethical and political discourse, literature, child literature and so on, for how these areas are written about and talked of. Consider, for example, in one of the more interesting approaches I have recently come across, Roland Bleiker's bringing together of poetry and international relations theory:

[p]oetry has the potential of subverting and unsettling the encroachment of dominant IR practices because, arguably, it is the most radical way of stretching, even violating the stylistic, syntactic, and grammatical rules of linguistic conventions ... [Poetic] language provides us with different eyes, different ways of perceiving what we already know. It is about unsettling, making strange that which is familiar, about opening up thinking space and creating possibilities to act in more inclusive ways.<sup>75</sup>

Bleiker hits on Rorty's, Derrida's and my own point that the poetic can play a valuable role as a 'rhetoric of disruption', including for a philosophical position such as Habermas'.

Habermas charges Derrida with failing to recognise "the special status that both philosophy and literary criticism, each in its own way, assume as mediators between

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73 I agree with Bernstein, however, that there are difficulties with some aspects of Rorty's position here: "[t]he ironic culture that Rorty finds so attractive undermines his hope for the novel as the vehicle of moral education. One consequence of this ironic culture has been to teach us to be skeptical of the moral 'force' of novels" (p. 285).

74 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 66 and p. 68 (emphasis added).

75 "Forget IR Theory", *Alternatives*, no. 22 (1997), pp. 74-75.

expert cultures and the everyday world", and claims that "Derrida overgeneralizes this one linguistic function – namely the poetic" (p. 207). But surely Habermas' argument is overstated here for, while he is right that there are *some* differences between philosophy and literature (nobody, and certainly not Habermas, is really denying philosophy these aspects, that philosophy can be cleansed of everything metaphorical and rhetorical), these differences are not as rigid as he sees them: "[t]his leveling and this assimilation [between philosophy and literature] confusedly jumble the constellations in which the rhetorical elements of language assume *entirely different* roles" (p. 209, emphasis added).

Habermas takes an either-or-ist stance for surely the rhetorical elements of language in philosophy and literature may *sometimes* assume similar roles. Further, as discussed in the previous chapter, Derrida has arguably made a number of important qualifying points concerning his approach that Habermas has not conceded.<sup>76</sup> Derrida is not therefore attempting to level the genre distinction between philosophy and literature.<sup>77</sup> While perhaps Rorty goes further than Derrida in this regard (and arguably pushes Derrida along with him, as I discussed earlier), the point that I feel is more important to draw attention to here in Rorty's and Derrida's work is the benefit from questioning and disrupting (rather than obliterating or, to use Habermas' term, "leveling"<sup>78</sup>) genre distinctions in emphasising the poetic, rhetorical elements of language. It is useful and valuable to acknowledge the rhetorical, poetic and metaphorical elements of language operating in other genres, such as philosophy, and so *open up* these genres, a position that Habermas resists and so misses out on:

the specialized languages of science and technology, law and morality, economics, political science etc ... live off the illuminating power of metaphorical tropes; but the rhetorical elements, which are by no means expunged, are *tamed*, as it were, and *enlisted for the special purposes of problem-solving* (p. 209) ... If ... philosophical thinking were to be relieved of the duty of solving problems and shifted over to the function of literary criticism, it would be robbed not merely of its seriousness, but of its productivity. (p. 210, emphasis added)<sup>79</sup>

To conclude this discussion, my position on the concept of reason and the conduct of critique comes down to making smaller claims, agreeing with Bernstein, Norris, Derrida and Habermas that to engage in critique is to have a position that is in *some sense*

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<sup>76</sup> Rorty has also not conceded these qualities to Derrida's approach, although for reasons different from Habermas, "I would want to insist that you cannot have it both ways. You cannot see [Derrida's] leaps in the dark as the magnificent poetic acts they are and still talk about 'philosophical rigor'. Rigor just does not come into it", "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?", p. 141.

<sup>77</sup> See Norris, for example, "we would be wrong to suppose ... that Derrida has gone over from one kind of writing to the other, renouncing 'philosophy' and its self-deluded claims for the sake of a henceforth uninhibited devotion to 'literature'", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 64.

<sup>78</sup> "Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature", in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 185-210.

<sup>79</sup> As Norris observes, Habermas is "pretty much out on a limb when he seeks to demarcate the types and conditions of language according to their various specialised roles", *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, p. 66.



rationally grounded, warranted or affirmed.<sup>80</sup> For, as Bernstein rightly concludes, if "we are liberated from thinking that the issues can be resolved by an appeal to *permanent* epistemological standards. What then? Certainly the issues do not disappear. Our task is precisely to 'hammer out' the relevant issues involved, to clarify them and to try to sort out what are the better and worse arguments".<sup>81</sup> At the same time, Rorty and Derrida, contrary to Habermas' and Bernstein's comments, open up an important dialogic space in emphasising play, metaphor and the poetic.

Bernstein's point that, while there are no definitive, ultimate foundations upon which to ground critique, we can still give historically contingent fallible reasons to support our beliefs, values and arguments, clears away some of the anxiety evident in theorists' position-clarifying statements – in Hunt's comment, for example, that there must be some "congruence between what you see and what I see and what a child-reader sees" (p. 89). However, the important point here for Hunt, other child literature critics and critics in general is the need to *theorise* one's position, to elaborate upon and engage with one's terms (such as "congruence", for example) in a critical and comprehensive way. Arguably, child literature theorists and feminist theorists have had to grapple with the perceived challenge to their critique posed by epistemological scepticism in a much more extensive way because of the concepts central to their disciplines: children/women and their lives and experiences. From a strong poststructuralist sceptical stance these notions appear to be highly dubious and so child and feminist theorists have had to work hard to keep open this dialogic space. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Hunt's hard won attempt to resist the more sceptical path trodden by Fish provides an excellent example of the point that Bernstein is making, pointing to important complementarities between these discourses – child literature theory and general theory and philosophy – that have up to now usually been overlooked/ignored.

## Reality, knowledge, truth and philosophies of language

### *Davidson and Bernstein on incommensurability versus radical incommensurability and plurality versus irreducible plurality*

There are major philosophical implications bound up with the idea of language as the absolute framework of intelligibility for thought and knowledge – that knowledge is constructed in language, where language cannot be subtracted from knowledge to leave uninterpreted data/an uninterpreted reality (that we cannot find and represent reality as it

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<sup>80</sup> See also Derrida, "I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not", "Deconstruction and the Other", *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton and Jacques Derrida - The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>81</sup> *Philosophical Profiles*, p. 51 (emphasis added).

really is because knowledge of reality is bound up with the language we speak). As Davidson emphasises, we can never attain knowledge of reality as it exists independently of human knowers, we cannot distinguish between the 'world in itself' and the 'world for us': "dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible".<sup>82</sup> This would be to believe that the 'really real' hides behind all appearances.<sup>83</sup> This 'turn to language' calls into question a range of issues raised by scientific empiricism (logical positivism) concerning the reduction of all knowledge to that provided by the empirical sciences where these are conceived as an unproblematic reflection of reality (see, for example, W. V. Quine on this point<sup>84</sup>).

To pick up from where I left this discussion in Chapter 4, my purpose here, however, is not to suggest that 'everything is language' and that 'there is nothing outside of the text'. In entering further into the muddled and highly complex issues in the realist/anti-realist debate and philosophies of language, I still want to hold onto and explore Ellis' point that the "replacing [of] the traditional pairing of words and things with a triad of sounds, concepts, and reality represents a *redefining* of the way words relate to the world, not an abolition of that relationship" (footnote 36; p. 48, emphasis added).

To return to Quine, it is the notion of 'indeterminacy' grounded upon *radically* 'incommensurable conceptual schemes' that I particularly want to focus on here. Taking the practice of translation as an example, he points to how terms can undergo radical changes in meaning from one linguistic framework to another. Quine concludes that meaning is therefore relative to the choice of linguistic framework. Statements are open to radical reinterpretation under different conceptual schemes. Hence reality, meaning and truth are relativised by Quine to a local and contingent framework of belief. There is no criteria for translating between different frameworks because they are incommensurable. We would always employ our own conceptual scheme for evaluating them.<sup>85</sup>

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82 *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 189.

83 However, as Vaden House rightly observes, while 'the world in itself' disappears, the 'found world' remains: the world that is "already there before we arrive and will ... be there after we are gone", *Without God or His Doubles*, p. 122.

84 "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed, rev. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 20-46. See also Quine's "Ontological Relativity" in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 26-68.

85 Thomas Kuhn falls into similar problems as Quine in maintaining the incommensurability of scientific paradigms - that different paradigms somehow create different worlds. See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn maintains that scientific terms/concepts can only be understood in relation to the various frameworks of belief (paradigms) where they have played a role. The history of science has been characterised by periods of stable scientific research broken up by scientific 'revolutions' of thought: paradigm changes. These paradigms are incommensurable because there are no standards in common; they are characterised by different frameworks of belief. (Kuhn has arguably been unfairly criticised in his use of the concept of 'paradigms', with later critics pushing this term towards a relativist position. Bernstein, for example, argues that to interpret Kuhn as saying we are so "imprisoned by these frameworks or paradigms that we cannot

Davidson challenges the notion that there are radical differences in meaning across and between conceptual schemes (interpretive frameworks/language systems). Such a notion leads to relativism (an untenable position) and ignores the possibility of interlinguistic understanding. Quine highlights the difficulties of translating with confidence between one conceptual scheme (language system) and another but, as Davidson points out, he relies upon interlinguistic resources to communicate his own (relativist) position even while maintaining that such 'translation' is impossible. Davidson stresses that interlinguistic understanding is *necessarily* presumed by anyone who expects that their views on a subject will at least make sense. There must therefore be certain shared criteria.<sup>86</sup> In this way, he argues that we should not regard 'truth' as relative to different conceptual schemes but instead accept the notion of 'truth' – of holding true – as basic to all language (as presupposed in every act of understanding) and therefore a basic (shared) standpoint for working out what someone means in 'unclear' statements (such as in the case of someone speaking a different language). The idea of a conceptual scheme that is *radically* incommensurable with other conceptual schemes is incoherent: "we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different" *but*, Davidson then adds, "neither can we intelligibly say that they are one".<sup>87</sup> Hence, Davidson is importantly not denying that in some sense different language systems/conceptual schemes are incommensurable (he therefore questions the notion of a determinate neutral universal framework to evaluate all validity claims) but maintaining that they cannot be *radically* incommensurable (that the terms used in another culture cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any of our terms). The idea of an alternative conceptual scheme depends upon us being able to interpret and compare where the differences occur with our own scheme on the basis of at least some measure of shared grasp.<sup>88</sup>

I also find Bernstein's position compelling on this point. He emphasises that incommensurable languages and traditions can be "compared and rationally evaluated in *multiple* ways", therefore challenging the view that these languages and traditions have nothing in common: "[t]here are always points of overlap and criss-crossing, even if there is not perfect commensuration ... Our linguistic horizons are always open. This is what enables comparison, and even sometimes a 'fusion of horizons'". Incommensurable languages and traditions are therefore not "self-contained windowless monads that share

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even communicate with those imprisoned in 'radically' incommensurable paradigms ... is an inaccurate and distortive reading of Kuhn" (p. 61.)

86 As Rorty suggests, "we shall never be able to have evidence that there exist persons who speak languages in principle untranslatable into English or hold beliefs all or most of which are incompatible with our own", *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 9.

87 *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 198.

88 As Norris observes, "the very idea of a conceptual scheme is logically dependent on our prior grasp of the truth-conditions that must presumably operate across all languages", *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory*, p. 64. Hence we cannot maintain that the truth values of sentences in 'one conceptual scheme' do not share any of the truth values of sentences in an alternative conceptual scheme.

nothing in common" (p. 65).<sup>89</sup> Bernstein emphasises plurality but not irreducible plurality of radically incommensurable languages (traditions, conceptual schemes and so on).<sup>90</sup> (This is an important challenge to Rorty's position, and to the concept of 'ethnocentrism', as I will shortly discuss. Bernstein is not dismissing Rorty's position outright – "[w]e can never escape the real practical possibility that we may fail to understand 'alien' traditions and the ways in which they are incommensurable with the traditions to which we belong" (p. 65) – but is emphasising that, as Davidson suggests, we are very often able to achieve understanding.)

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This is to make a significant point, particularly in the context of my highly critical comments in Chapters 3 and 4 on critics' use of such terms as 'adult/child culture', 'adult/child reading experience', 'adult/child interpretive community' and 'adult/child conceptual scheme' (as well as my comments in Chapters 1 and 2 about critics' references to groups of 'informed readers', 'critical adults', 'qualified readers' and so on). Certainly, these cultures, conceptual schemes, reading experiences and various groupings of readers are incommensurable. They cannot be easily defined, compared and evaluated. However, this does not mean that they are radically incommensurable, that there are not *any* principles by which they can be defined, compared and evaluated. The key issue here, however, is that in using such concepts (child culture, adult reading experience, qualified adult readers), critics must theorise these concepts and *elaborate upon* and *engage with* these concepts in a critical and comprehensive way. As suggested in my previous chapters, very often critics have used these terms in an *over-reductive* manner, claiming a single and unproblematic way (rather than acknowledging that there are *multiple* ways) of defining, comparing and evaluating these 'cultures', 'experiences' and 'interpretive communities'. Booth's theorised, non-absolutist notion of "co-duction", for example, is more sophisticated than Hunt's largely untheorised, seemingly unproblematic notion of "common-sense agreement".

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89 Similarly, Fairlamb observes that incommensurability is a term that has been "radicalized in an incoherent way". "Cultures", he continues, "are incommensurable in the sense of lacking a single principle of comparison to which all would agree ... Cultures, in other words, lack a reductive principle to adjudicate their differences. But should this be surprising? Members of the *same* culture do not have such principles either. That sort of commensurability is besides the point because it does not exist anywhere. On the other hand, cultures are not incommensurable if that means there are not any principles with which they could compare themselves", *Critical Conditions*, p. 59.

90 Importantly, Bernstein points out that this is not to put forward "an alternative way to achieve commensuration, but rather largely a struggle against the assumption that all contributions to culture are commensurable", *Philosophical Profiles*, p. 43.

Against this background, Davidson expounds his 'principle of charity'. He proposes that we assume an ability on behalf of language speakers to detect when a sentence is held true ("[w]e do this sort of off the cuff interpretation all the time", we decide in favour of a reinterpretation of words "in order to preserve a reasonable theory of belief") and that we adopt a 'principle of charity' according to which we should try and maximise the number of sentences held true).<sup>91</sup> While there is not scope here to pursue Davidson's position further,<sup>92</sup> Frank Farrell's comments on his work are particularly interesting in the context of this thesis. He suggests that Davidson sets up a "triangular space" in his work whose sides are the world, the speaking or acting self/subject, and the cultural realm in which our semantic production is repeated, interpreted and shaped. Problems arise in supposing that "a discovery of a certain role for subjectivity in fixing the correct picture of the world, or of a similar role for interpretation or for cultural practices, will bring along with it a necessary emptying out of the other sides". Instead, it is important to work against "the inertia" leading us towards this sort of model, and to "acknowledge a space of mutual determinations in which there remains very considerable pressure from all three sides on fixing truth and meaning".<sup>93</sup>

### *Rorty, 'ethnocentrism' and radical incommensurability*

Like Davidson, Rorty also emphasises the linguistic nature of truth and denies that a 'thing' makes sentences true: "attempts to get back behind language to something which 'grounds' it or which it 'expresses', or to which it might hope to be 'adequate', have not worked".<sup>94</sup> Unlike Davidson, however, with his notion of 'holding true' and 'principle of

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91 *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 196. "What makes interpretation possible", Davidson states, "is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker holds it to be ... what must be counted in favour of a method of interpretation is that it puts the interpreter in general agreement with the speaker ... The basic methodological precept is, therefore, that a good theory of interpretation maximizes agreement" (pp. 168-169). This approach is not designed "to eliminate disagreement, nor can it; its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation – some foundation – in agreement ... Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it ... Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right on most matters (pp. 196-197).

92 For detailed studies of Davidson's work, see for example, Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); David Evnine, *Donald Davidson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); B. Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); and *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). See also Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

93 *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, pp. 113-114.

94 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. xx. For Rorty on Davidson, see "The Contingency of Language" in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 3-22, and "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth" in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Lepore, pp. 333-368. For Davidson's response to Rorty see "Afterthoughts, 1987" to Davidson's "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Malachowski, pp. 134-137.

charity'; Habermas, with his notion of 'intersubjective recognition'; Bernstein, with his notion of 'points of overlap' and concept of 'non-radical incommensurability'; Gadamer, as I will later discuss, with his notion of a 'fusion of horizons'; and Ellis and Farrell, with their somewhat more sophisticated conceptions of reality in terms of a redefining of the way words relate to the world rather than an abolition of that relationship, Rorty arguably moves towards an 'anti-realist' and 'relativist' stance. He argues that there is no way for us to defend our truth claims ('contingency goes all the way down') and the notion of 'truth' is therefore that held to be 'good in the way of belief' (truth equals 'truth for us'). Questions of truth and falsehood (right and wrong) are internal to language games and can therefore be judged only in accordance with their own criteria. By "pressing the incommensurability thesis to this extreme", as Bernstein observes, Rorty has raised the "specter of an extreme relativism" (p. 62).

For Rorty, what is held to be 'true' is a product of the way beliefs hang together in various vocabularies that prevail at the time. 'Truth' is simply a term attached to those ideas and beliefs that count as true for current purposes: "'the true' is ... 'the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief' ... ['truth' is] a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way".<sup>95</sup> 'Truth' is a matter of social practice and communal consensus where this consensus can be changed not by a Habermasian 'force of the better argument' but only by playing "new [vocabularies] off against the old"<sup>96</sup> and making these new vocabularies "look attractive".<sup>97</sup>

The notion of 'truth' for Bernstein, Davidson, Norris and Habermas is not contingent upon irreducibly plural and radically incommensurable social practices, alternative language games and alternative conceptual frameworks<sup>98</sup> that determine what shall count as true in any given context. Davidson, as I have discussed, in particular challenges the notion that discourses have different regimes of truth because they are radically different conceptual schemes – that the truth values of sentences in one conceptual scheme do not share any of the truth values in another scheme – so there is no common ground from

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95 *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xxv.

96 *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 73.

97 Rorty states, "I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive" (p. 9).

98 Using the term 'alternative conceptual frameworks' here might appear to contradict Rorty's rejection of this notion in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (see pp. 3-17) but, as Taylor has observed, "what Rorty is arguing against here is the distinction between a single world-out-there and a plurality of conceptual schemes. It is the 'world' as a transcendent pole of all our conceivings which is meant to be 'well lost'". Rorty is still relying upon an irrefutable notion of "world views as closed systems, like different coloured glasses on people's noses", "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition", in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Malachowski, footnote 31, p. 268. That Rorty is ambiguous in his appeal to 'alternative conceptual frameworks/language games' – they are sometimes described as self-contained and incommensurable (as Quine argues) and sometimes described as shared with common ground (as Davidson argues) – is a significant critique of his position. (As I will discuss, Rorty's ethnocentric stance here also raises questions.)

which to base an *argument* (there is only making a new vocabulary "look attractive") or draw a distinction between *truth* and *falsity* (there is only 'what is held to be good in the way of belief' by current consensus).<sup>99</sup>

For Bernstein, Norris and others, 'truth' is clearly something more than consensus belief, what we happen to believe at the moment is good in the way of belief. While these critics accept the variable arrangements of language and social practice, and of the will-to-power, these do not remove the distinctions between truth and falsity or reduce them simply to a product of social practices (equivalent to what is currently acceptable as good in the way of belief) and power relations.<sup>100</sup> They contest Rorty's position that what counts as true is always decided by appeal to a consensus of shared beliefs, that is, as what counts as true for *us*: pragmatists view truth as "what is good for *us* to believe".<sup>101</sup> For how can we then understand the way we criticise and change our established standards of justification if we do not accept the idea of a possible consensus that could transcend the opposition of 'us' and 'them'. Hence, Rorty has invited the charge of 'ethnocentrism' in relying upon a notion of language games/world views as closed systems. The charge is that he is privileging his own interpretive perspective without constraint. Rorty states that he sees "ethnocentrism as an inescapable condition"<sup>102</sup> – that

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<sup>99</sup> As Norris observes, if "meaning is fixed by truth-conditions" and these must in turn "be relativized to the whole set of sentences believed true by speakers in a certain cultural community", then truth becomes "a piece of redundant technical equipment", *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory*, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup> Prado provides a good example of this more open view of truth in regard to truth and power relations. He argues that while truth is a product of power relations, it is not *only* a product of power relations, *Starting with Foucault*, pp. 134-137. The acceptance of new truths that come about as a result of a radical perspective change through "limit-experiences" is an important counter to the machinations of power, a way open to individuals to escape from the subjectivities imposed by power-relations. We accept and appropriate many discourse-dependent, power-produced truths in our lifetimes but "there will be times when encounters with discourse-dependent truths that are new will generate serious intellectual turmoil" (p. 136).

<sup>101</sup> Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 22. He continues, somewhat heavy-handedly, "[pragmatists] see the gap between truth and justification not as something to be bridged by isolating a ... transcultural sort of rationality which can be used to criticize certain cultures and praise others" (pp. 22-23). Rorty emphasises consensus within a community/world view for, while he speaks of "the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can" (p. 23), he adds that "the consensus of a community is taken as central" (footnote 1, p. 23). Rorty does not maintain that "every belief is as good as every other" or that the term 'true' has "as many meanings as there are procedures of justification", but that "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry" (p. 23). This is, I think, at the centre of critics' concerns. Rorty suggests a way around the problem of objective truth (he is not saying that there is 'no truth' but emphasising truth as 'truth for us') but critics view his 'ethnocentrism' as an erosion of the concept of sharing and perceiving a common world.

<sup>102</sup> *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 15. (Further references will be in the text.) Rorty defends his stance by expounding upon his "anti-anti-ethnocentrism" stance (p. 204): "the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantages of ethnocentrism. This is to be open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This culture is an *ethos* which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism – on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters" (p. 2).

"we must work by our own lights" (p. 38), that "beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have" (p. 26), and that we must "privilege our own group" (p. 29). "To be ethnocentric", Rorty concludes, "is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group ... comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible" (p. 30). (It is against this background that, as I will discuss later, Rorty upholds the merits of a 'liberal democracy': "[o]ur community – the community of the liberal intellectuals of the secular modern West" [p. 29].) Given my stance in this thesis, I do not want to push further the criticism of Rorty as 'relativist' but point to Rorty's comments as moving him further towards an 'either-or-ist' stance that has the tendency to shut down dialogic space.

Rorty's stance also has ethical/political implications. If we accept a consensus view of 'truth' (as 'good in the way of belief', 'true for all present purposes'), for example, how then are we to critique existing consensus values and to detect a 'false' (distorted) consensus. In this context, Bernstein is particularly critical of Rorty's appeal to what he perceives to be a generalised (unelaborated) concept of 'social practices' (that "the True and Right are matters of social practice"<sup>103</sup>). Bernstein asks, that if all justification involves reference to existing social practices, "[w]hat are the social practices to which we should appeal? How do we discriminate the better from the worse? Which ones need to be discarded, criticized, and reconstructed?"<sup>104</sup>

There are also difficulties with Rorty's response, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, to the critiques of his position, particularly to the charge of 'relativism' brought against him:

I need to argue that the distinctions between absolutism and relativism ... are obsolete and clumsy tools – remnants of a vocabulary we should try to replace. But 'argument' is not the right word. For on my account of intellectual progress ... rebutting objections to one's redescrptions of some things will be largely a matter of redescrbing other things ... So my strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on.<sup>105</sup>

First, it appears here that Rorty is seeking to break free from 'traditional' philosophical discourse (from the questions that have been central to philosophy hitherto): "[t]he trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are

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<sup>103</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 178.

<sup>104</sup> *Philosophical Profiles*, p. 48. As Bernstein observes, for all of Rorty's "advocacy of liberal pluralistic openness", it looks as if what he is recommending is a "fideistic absolutism". If our central beliefs cannot be "even minimally rationally warranted", it appears as if "Rorty is telling us that when doubts are raised about one's final vocabulary the only response that is appropriate is 'Here I stand (and I hope you will also stand here)'" , *The New Constellation*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>105</sup> *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 44.



expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary".<sup>106</sup> However, as I argued in the previous chapter, the notion of a total break with the metaphysical tradition is incoherent (although the *disruption* of this tradition, as I will argue, opens up important dialogic space) and, as Taylor has observed, it finally undermines Rorty's position. By this rhetorical sleight of hand – that the pragmatist, in "not having *any* epistemology", cannot have "a relativist one"<sup>107</sup> – Rorty seeks to avoid the charge of relativism.

And second, Rorty's strategy to 'change the subject' is also somewhat suspect. As Taylor has argued, there is concern that in adopting such a strategy Rorty is not listening to – because he is not engaging with – what critics have to say: "[j]ust trying to walk away from the old epistemology, without working out an alternative conception, seems paradoxically a formula for remaining trapped in it to some degree".<sup>108</sup>

Related to this difficulty with Rorty's position, critics have also pointed to problems with Rorty's so-called 'anti-realist' (or 'non-realist') stance, a charge that Rorty seeks to avoid in recasting the debate between 'realism and anti-realism' as being between 'realism and pragmatism'.<sup>109</sup> Rorty argues that we need to replace "the idea of truth as correspondence to reality" with "the idea of truth as what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters".<sup>110</sup> As critics have observed, however, Rorty sees the choice here as being only between either 'truth as correspondence to reality' or 'truth as good in the way of belief'. He therefore assumes that discussions about 'truth' (other than those based on the terms he has described) must *always* involve some version of the notion that sentences are made true by their mirroring of real world objects. As Norris emphasises, "there is no reason to suppose that this error infects all strong versions of the truth-conditional claim, or indeed all forms of correspondence-theory ... The plausibility of Rorty's deconstructive moves comes from his lumping of all realist philosophies".<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 8.

<sup>107</sup> Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 24.

<sup>108</sup> "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition", p. 273.

<sup>109</sup> Rorty prefers the term "anti-representationalism" and strives to define "a position which is beyond realism and anti-realism", observing that the term 'anti-realism' "tends to beg the question which the pragmatism wants to raise: the question of whether notions like 'made true by the world' ... should be used at all, or rather discarded", *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 49. Again, this falls into my critique discussed above, of Rorty's seeking to change/evade the subject.

<sup>110</sup> *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 68.

<sup>111</sup> "Reading Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Right Interpretation", in *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory*, p. 72. See also Norris' most recent studies on this issue, *New Idols of the Cave: One the Limits of Anti-Realism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) and *Resources of Realism: Prospects for 'Post-Analytic' Philosophy* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1997). David Houghton also points to Rorty's "caricature of these theories as attempts to substitute purely factual or natural relationships between words and things", commenting that "a better explanation of what is going on, certainly a more charitable one, would be that this is not what these authors intend at all", "Rorty's Talk-About", in *Reading Rorty*, ed Malachowski, pp. 156-170. Similarly, as Taylor observes, Rorty maintains "that the only alternative to his Pragmatism is some belief in correspondence theory, the belief that one's 'philosophy corresponds to the way things really are'" – which as he makes clear is no alternative. Rorty assumes "(i) that

Hence Bernstein's charge of 'either-or-ism' against Rorty: "[o]ne of Rorty's most seductive and dubious strategies is the way he reduces complex issues to extreme either/or's ... this way of posing issues blocks and obscures nuanced discriminations that need to be made" (p. 282).<sup>112</sup> Rorty therefore somewhat misses the point, oversimplifying a position when there are more interesting things that could be said.

As Cornel West observes, not all poststructuralists/antifoundationalists are or therefore need to be anti-realist.<sup>113</sup> While Rorty therefore avoids an untenable idealist position (where language brings the world to expression) and, as discussed, rejects an equally untenable realist position (where language represents the world accurately), he adopts a strong anti-realist position that closes up the space opened up by critics such as Ellis and Farrell.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to go further into the complex issues of truth and reality. I would however point out two interesting approaches (among many others) that, while I cannot pursue them further here, offer alternative perspectives to Rorty's notion of truth as current consensus belief and to his 'anti-realist' stance. These are West's "minimalist realist" position, a position that rejects 'idealism' but is concerned "with the plurality of versions of 'reality'",<sup>114</sup> and C. G. Prado's work on the "faces of truth" in Foucault's work: "that there are different truths and different ways of saying [the truth]".<sup>115</sup>

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the only candidate for a general account of truth is in terms of correspondence" and "(ii) that correspondence is to be understood in a rather simple-minded way", "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition", pp. 268-269. Taylor further comments that "Rorty is still partly trapped in the old model. It is not that he explicitly subscribes to the representational view ... [i]t is rather that his conception of the alternatives still seem to be commanded by that view ... So to learn that our thoughts don't correspond to things-in-themselves is to conclude that they don't correspond to anything at all. If transcendent entities don't make them true, then nothing makes them true" (p. 271).

112 See also Fairlamb, Rorty's "conflation of differing foundationalist theories is symptomatic of [his] critical strategy: he evaluates different strong foundationalist theories only as they resemble the monological ideal. Thus they are only considered for the reductive form of the argument, not in terms of the potential significance of their content", *Critical Conditions*, p. 62.

113 See "Theory, Pragmatism, and Politics" in *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, eds. Hollinger and Depew, pp. 314-326. This issue is often a problem in Rorty's work. As Vaden House points out, Rorty frequently conflates arguments against foundationalism with arguments against realism: "[i]t is possible that, for Rorty, realism and foundationalism are not only interdependent, but basically synonymous", *Without God or His Doubles*, p. 48.

114 West, "Theory, Pragmatism and Politics", in *Pragmatism*, eds. Hollinger and Depew, p. 316.

115 Prado, "The Faces of Truth", *Starting with Foucault*, p. 144. Prado quotes Foucault from *Foucault Live*, trans. John Johnson (New York : Semiotexte, 1989), p. 314.

## Ethical and political engagement and a dialogic/rhetoric of disruption approach

*Bernstein, Gadamer, Levinas, Taylor, Habermas, Rorty, Norris: an ethics and politics of dialogue/rhetoric of disruption*

A number of critics have recently challenged what they perceive to be reductive views of ethical/political concepts as well as attempts by some critics to exclude ethical/political critique altogether.<sup>116</sup> Martha Nussbaum, for example, comments on "the absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy", that we are social beings "puzzling out" what might be, for us, "the best way to live". This sense of "practical importance, which animates contemporary ethical theory", she concludes, is "absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists".<sup>117</sup> While explicit engagement with the ethical and political has been said to be absent from some contemporary theory (as my discussion of both child and general contemporary critical theory in Chapters 3 and 4 at times confirms), the point I want to emphasise is that it can never bracket ethics and politics entirely. Despite the absence of any fixed, permanent support to which we can appeal in making political-ethical decisions, engagement with the ethical and political is unavoidable. As Bernstein comments, while we may well be sceptical of "any talk of ahistorical normative standards", this does not make the question of "what one is 'for' or 'against' disappear. The rhetoric of disruption and genealogical critique does not escape from the implicit affirmation of some 'good', some ethical-political valorization" (pp. 156-157). I agree with Bernstein on this point (and will not spend further time in this thesis defending engagement with ethical and political concerns) but the key question is "*how can we 'warrant' (in any sense of the term) the ethical-political 'positions' we take?*" (Bernstein, p. 191).

My initial response to this question is that the ethical-political position of most of the theorists under discussion here – Bernstein, Habermas, Gadamer, Taylor, Norris, and Rorty – manifests itself in their dialogic/rhetoric of disruption approach, an approach that emphasises achieving mutual understanding through dialogue but an understanding that does not rule out disagreement. (There is insufficient scope in this thesis to discuss in depth these critics' ethical and political positions – the details of a Habermasian "discursive democracy"<sup>118</sup> and Rortyan "bourgeois liberalism"<sup>119</sup>, for example –

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116 I discussed this issue in some detail in Chapters 1 and 2 and will not duplicate that discussion here. See my footnote 38 in Chapter 1 for critics active in this area.

117 *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 170-171.

118 See critical essays on Habermas' position here in "Discursive Democracy", Part IV in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. White, pp. 165-259. See also Fairlamb: "Habermas claims to discover in the formal conditions of democracy, a mandate/procedure for more public participation in the management of society" *Critical Conditions*, p. 211.

119 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 84. Many commentators have questioned Rorty's conception of "bourgeois liberal society" – see, for example, Bernstein's "One Step Forward, Two

although I have touched upon some aspects of these positions in my comments to date). Before I elaborate on the ethics and politics of a dialogic/rhetoric of disruption approach, it is useful to first look briefly at Gadamer's position.

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It is apparent that Gadamer's work has influenced many of the critics that I have been discussing in this chapter in term of its emphasis on a conversational/dialogic approach.<sup>120</sup>

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics emphasises that human experience in the world is always concerned with understanding and interpretation<sup>121</sup>, and that understanding and interpretation are always historically shaped and linguistically mediated. Understanding is always immersed in history and tradition: "[u]nderstanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused".<sup>122</sup> And because "it is the nature of tradition to exist in the medium of language" (p. 351), understanding is always entangled with language: "language is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realized. The mode of realisation of understanding is interpretation ... All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language which would allow the object to come into words" (p. 350).

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Steps Backward: Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy" and "Rorty's Liberal Utopia" in *The New Constellation*, pp. 230-257 and pp. 258-292 respectively. Bernstein observes that "Rorty simply speaks globally about 'liberal democracy' without ever unpacking what it involves or doing justice to the enormous historical controversy about what liberal democracy is" (p. 238), and comments that it is "never clear why Rorty, who claims that there is no consensus about competing conceptions of the good life, thinks there is any more consensus about conceptions of justice or liberal democracy" (p. 245).

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Rorty's "From Epistemology to Hermeneutics" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 315-356. Habermas' work also has its source in Gadamer's hermeneutic account of language: "the different lifeworlds that collide with one another do not stand *next to each other* without any mutual understanding. As totalities, they follow the pull of their claims to universality and work out their differences until their horizons of understanding 'fuse' with one another, as Gadamer puts it" (Habermas, p. 359).

<sup>121</sup> For useful studies of Gadamer's work see, for example, Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida; Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994); G. B. Madison, "Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur", in *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, ed. Kearney, pp. 290-349; *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1991); Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); and Wright, "History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction", in *Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Hawthorn, pp. 83-96.

<sup>122</sup> *Truth and Method* (1960; New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 258. Further references will be in the text.

Drawing on Heidegger's work,<sup>123</sup> Gadamer emphasises that we never understand and interpret without 'prejudices' (variously translated as preconceptions, prejudgements, fore-meanings, presuppositions, fore-structures): "there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed towards escaping their thrall" (p. 446). When we read, we begin with certain preconceptions that remain or alter in the process of reading. (This in turn provides further projections of meaning and defines the 'hermeneutic circle', the circular movement of interpretations: "[t]he anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes explicit understanding in that the parts, that are determined by the whole, themselves also determine this whole" [p. 259].) Gadamer emphasises the constitutive role prejudices play in understanding. Prejudices are not an obstacle to understanding but a condition for the possibility of understanding: "[t]o try to eliminate one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions" (p. 358). To avoid major misunderstandings we must become conscious of our prejudices by putting them 'at risk' so as to understand others and texts. In *dialogue* with another person (or with a historical text), we must overcome the situatedness of our own "horizon" (p. 269) – our particular position in language and history, our prejudices and value systems – and reach a common ground<sup>124</sup> that can sustain both positions in a "fusion" (or overlap) of "horizons" (p. 273):

[a] conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. (p. 347)<sup>125</sup>

The concept of dialogue/conversation is therefore central to Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, as it is central to the other critical approaches discussed here. In conversation,

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<sup>123</sup> Gadamer is influenced by Heidegger's conception of the prestructured (fore-structured) nature of understanding, that we do not come to anything innocent of presuppositions: "[the] *terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception*", *Being and Time*, p. 193. (See my earlier discussion on the hermeneutic circle in Chapters 3 and 4.)

<sup>124</sup> "Understanding", Gadamer states, "is primarily agreement or harmony with another person" (p. 158).

<sup>125</sup> Gadamer's notion of a 'fusion of horizons' is interesting in the context of recent debates about incommensurability, as discussed earlier. Madison observes that this notion is essentially a "dialectical" one: "[i]n regard, for instance, to the question as to whether different cultural world-views are in any way 'commensurable', the fusion-of-horizons notion would oblige one to defend a position which would be *neither* absolutist *nor* relativist. On the one hand, the hermeneuticist would want to argue ... against the idea of 'universal commensuration', the idea, that is, that the values operative in different cultures can be measured or ranked according to some univocal, hierarchical standard of comparison ... On the other hand, however, the hermeneuticist would want to argue just as strenuously against an unrestrained 'particularism', i.e., against the outright rejection of universalism altogether", "Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur", p. 307.

as well as interrogating the person/text, the other person/text must be allowed to pose their questions to us, to challenge us and our preconceptions.<sup>126</sup>

It is tempting, as Zuckart comments, to see "Gadamerian hermeneutics as an optimal compromise". Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Gadamer "denies that we have knowledge of an independently existing, external intelligible order" and like Derrida, "he insists, what we have is a heritage or tradition". However, Gadamer maintains that "we cannot and should not try merely to preserve that heritage ... Rather than a closed society or understanding, Gadamer advocates ongoing dialogue and openness".<sup>127</sup> But while Gadamer provides an important account of how we read texts (with preconceptions and projections shaped by us and the text, through language and tradition) and emphasises the need to question our assumptions and seek some sort of dialogue, there are problems with his account in terms of his privileging of a particular conception of 'language' and 'tradition'. These issues have formed much of the basis of the so-called 'Habermas-Gadamer debate', as I will discuss later.

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As my introductory quotes to this section illustrate, Bernstein, Habermas, Gadamer, Taylor, Norris, and Rorty share common concerns about the importance of free inquiry, conversation and dialogue. Bernstein, for example, states that we need to "dedicate ourselves to the practical task of furthering the type of solidarity, participation, and mutual recognition that is founded in dialogical communities".<sup>128</sup> Both Rorty and Habermas are sympathetic to the ideal of 'undistorted communication'. "[W]e shall call 'true' and 'good'", Rorty states for example, "whatever is the outcome of free discussion ... I share with Habermas the ... claim that the only general account to be given of our criteria for truth is one which refers to 'undistorted communication'".<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Gadamerian hermeneutics suggests that "meaningful dialogue with the 'other'" is always feasible, "given the necessary effort and good will", but "a univocally uniform understanding is neither possible nor even, for that matter, desirable".<sup>130</sup> This is a key point: it is the "to-and-fro play of dialogue" (p. 4) that is desirable, not uniform

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126 In this way, Gadamer (building on the work of Heidegger) critiques the so-called 'Cartesian Anxiety'. He challenges the notion of the subject constituting the world or a neutral subject discovering a world of mind-independent facts. For Gadamer, understanding is where subject and object - interpreter and text - mutually determine one another. As Wright observes, rather than "yielding to the lure of 'radical relativism'", the hermeneutical model "retain[s] a notion of the text-in-itself, with its own right to assert its meanings against the reader's", that is at the same time "thoroughly sceptical of the unexamined but highly problematic ideas of 'objectivity'", "History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction", p. 92.

127 *Postmodern Platos*, pp. 269-270.

128 *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 231.

129 *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 84.

130 Madison, "Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur", p. 307.

understanding and agreement. Derrida's and Foucault's "rhetoric of disruption", as Bernstein terms it (an approach Rorty, Bernstein and other critics also employ), in my view works as an important *adjunct* to a dialogic approach in keeping this point always in view (something not fully brought out in Bernstein's study). These critics are alert "to the ways in which 'mutual understanding' so frequently turns into mutual misunderstanding, how appeals to dialogue can and do contain their own hidden violences" (Bernstein, p. 220). Hence, the purpose of a dialogic/rhetoric of disruption approach is to emphasis both complementarities and tensions (commonalities and differences) between critical positions, to remain open to 'the Other'.

To further clarify my approach, I want to build on ideas flowing from Bernstein, as influenced by Levinas' account of our ethical relationship to 'the Other', concerning our freedom *and* responsibility in making ethical and political choices. In this context, I am also interested in Taylor's comment about acknowledging "the full range of goods we live by",<sup>131</sup> Foucault's point about the 'faces of truth' ("that there are different truths and different ways of saying the truth") and Michael Dillon's observation that "freedom and the ethical are necessarily and intimately tied together".<sup>132</sup>

Taylor traces the development of Western moral standards and identity through three interwoven "domains": "the original theistic grounding for these standards; a second one that centres on a naturalism of disengaged reason ... and a third family of views which finds its sources in Romantic expressivism". He suggests that the disengaged view "leans heavily on our powers of disengaged reason" of "self-responsible freedom", while romantic views "make more of our powers of creative imagination" (p. 495-496).

Significant here is Taylor's point that these domains do not stay the same: "they are continually borrowing from and [are] influenced by each other" (p. 496). He also warns about taking "one-sided views" (p. 503) of these domains, so emphasising our need to acknowledge "the full range of goods we live by".<sup>133</sup> Dillon's observation in this context is important. Not only does he emphasise that engagement with ethical questions is unavoidable, both in ethical critique and meta-ethical critique (the 'ethics' of the ethics of critique), but that "freedom and the ethical are necessarily and intimately tied together":

[t]he ethical here does not arise as a command ethic issuing from an original causative source. Rather it is the event of freedom itself. For the question, 'What is it to be?' is the question that distinguishes the human way of being. Indeed, it arises in and as the very interrogatory freedom of that being, a being distinguished as such by the fact that it *has* to ask this question of itself in the circumstances – always

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131 *Sources of the Self*, p. 107. Further references will be in the text.

132 *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 62.

133 For a useful study on Taylor's work, see *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. Tully.

historical, not deterministically socialised – in which it necessarily always already finds itself simply because that is its way of being. 'What is it to be?' is also, of course, fundamentally an ethical question.<sup>134</sup>

Dillon, Taylor and Foucault therefore all highlight the openness of an ethics (and politics) of freedom. This openness, however, brings with it both freedom *and* responsibility. As Bernstein observes, there is "no way of escaping from human freedom and responsibility in making moral decisions".<sup>135</sup> Bernstein and Dillon are influenced by Levinasian ethics. Dillon suggests, for example, that "the political is precisely this: the continuous challenge to put human freedom as an ethical encounter with others, and within the Otherness that is integral to its own constitution as a way of being, into work in the world" (p. 62).<sup>136</sup> Ethics is defined by Levinas as "the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other".<sup>137</sup> In this way, Levinas describes our ethical relationship with the Other as putting ourselves in the Other's place so that we take responsibility for the Other as if we were the Other. Hence, our responsibility is not just to the Other but for the Other.<sup>138</sup>

Drawing on Levinas' work, Bernstein suggests that the response to the possibility that we might not do justice to "the alterity of 'the Other'" should be "an ethical one" – to assume "the responsibility to acknowledge, appreciate and not to violate the alterity of 'the Other'" – for, without such acknowledgment and recognition, "no ethics is possible". We must, Bernstein continues, resist the temptation of "*either* facily assimilating the alterity of 'the Other' to what is 'the Same' (this is what Levinas so acutely emphasizes<sup>139</sup>) *or* simply dismissing (or repressing) the alterity of 'the Other' as being of no significance – 'merely' contingent" (p. 74). On this last point, the alterity of 'the Other' does not therefore mean that there is *nothing* in common between ourselves and 'the Other' (a point I have been making in various guises throughout this thesis). As Bernstein again observes, influenced by Levinas, "to think of 'the Other' as an 'absolute Other', where this is taken to mean that there is *no* way whatsoever for relating the I to 'the Other', is

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134 *Politics of Security*, p. 62.

135 *Philosophical Profiles*, p. 42.

136 See also Critchley, "Conclusion: Philosophy, Politics, and Democracy", *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, pp. 236-241.

137 *Totality and Infinity: Essays on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p. 43.

138 Studies on Levinas' work of relevance to this discussion include *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995); Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993); Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas; Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991); Bernstein, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited", *The New Constellation*, pp. 57-78; and Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas", *Writing and Difference*. See also Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

139 Levinas has been challenged, however, for being "blind to sex difference" by feminist and other theorists, see Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 136.



unintelligible and incoherent". Instead, he proposes that we should foster "the type of imagination where we are at once sensitive to the sameness of 'the Other' with ourselves *and* the radical alterity that defies and resists reduction of 'the Other' to 'the Same'" (p. 74). This relationship with 'the Other' is central to Bernstein's (and other critics') dialogic approach: "[c]ritical engaged dialogue requires opening of oneself to the full power of what the 'other' is saying. Such an opening does not entail agreement but rather the *to-and-fro play of dialogue*" (p. 4, emphasis added).

Against this background, Habermas (like Bernstein and Norris) can be seen to be emphasising, as Taylor puts it, our powers of "disengaged reason" of "self-responsible freedom". While both Habermas' and Rorty's approaches point to the importance of free inquiry, Habermas favours communicative action oriented towards validity claims open to scrutiny and critique (to public justification), underpinned by the notion of "intersubjective recognition" (p. 314). This notion of 'intersubjective recognition' of the validity of another's utterances is central. Habermas states, for example, that "even a decentred society needs as a reference point the projected unity of an intersubjectively formed common will".<sup>140</sup> This would tend to pull Habermas towards privileging *collective* interests. The critique of Habermas often made here is the limit which the emphasis on the 'collective interests' appears to imply but, through this emphasis, Habermas frequently opens up critical debates that are themselves limited and limiting because of their uncritical celebration of an irreducible plurality and radical incommensurability.

Similarly, against this background, Rorty (like Derrida) can be seen to be emphasising, as Taylor puts it, "our powers of creative imagination". While both Rorty's and Habermas' approaches point to the importance of free inquiry, Rorty (as discussed earlier in this chapter) favours "play, metaphor, and the figure of the poet" (Bernstein, p. 260). He reflects upon self-making and self-creation ("let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities"<sup>141</sup>) through innovation, experimentation and redescription. Rorty questions the obsession with argument, favouring instead the role of 'new vocabularies': "[a] liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' (or 'right' or 'just') whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter".<sup>142</sup> This would tend to pull Rorty towards privileging radical contingency and *difference*. The critique of Rorty's position often made here is the limitlessness which the emphasis on the 'poetic' appears to imply but, through this emphasis, Rorty frequently opens up limited and limiting critical debates.

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<sup>140</sup> *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 141.

<sup>141</sup> *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 84.

<sup>142</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 67.

There are also problems with Habermas' approach in terms of shutting down dialogic space, of limiting that space to one highly problematic ideal practice. In this way, Habermas limits the openness of the ethics/politics of freedom ("the full range of goods we live by", the "faces of truth") which Derrida's and Foucault's rhetoric of disruption, as does Rorty's, plays a valuable role in questioning (and therefore keeping open dialogic space). Habermas' approach (based on mutual understanding and cooperative action through uncoerced communication) breaks down unless we fall in completely with his approach.

Similarly, there are also problems with Rorty's approach in terms of shutting down dialogic space, of limiting that space by seeking to 'change the subject'. Rorty limits the openness of the politics/ethics of freedom, something that Habermas' rhetoric of disruption (as well as that of other critics of Rorty's work) plays a valuable role in questioning (and therefore keeping open dialogic space). Rorty is, as Bernstein observes, frequently left with nowhere to stand, acknowledging the ideal of public justification, scrutiny and critique while denying its commitment to validity claims admitting of argument and counter-argument. An uncritical celebration of irreducible plurality and radical incommensurability has as many dangers as an uncritical celebration of commonalities and commensurabilities. As Bernstein observes, "we must be extremely wary of sliding from references to new possibilities of thinking, acting, and being to a *positive* evaluation of such possibilities" (p. 162).

This tension between endless hermeneutic openness (an openness that, as I have suggested, can in turn be viewed as a *closure*) and critical closure (a closure that can in turn be seen as *opening up* dialogue) similarly typifies the so-called 'Habermas-Gadamer debate'.

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Briefly, while accepting Gadamer's conversational model of communication, Habermas seeks to establish critical grounds/conditions/constraints for communication (and social action) within the openness of communication.<sup>143</sup> Habermas is critical of Gadamer's privileging of tradition, as well as his apparent collapsing of the world into language, for seemingly disabling these critical grounds.

Gadamer maintains that there is no understanding without presuppositions, and presuppositions are historical by nature (part of the traditions to which we belong):

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<sup>143</sup> For a detailed discussion of this debate, see Alan How, *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social: Back to Bedrock* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995). See also Fairlamb, "Gadamer's Universalism: The Limits of Hermeneutic Authority", *Critical Conditions*, pp. 104-134.

"[t]here is no such thing, in fact, as a point outside history from which the identity of a problem can be conceived within the vicissitudes of the various attempts to solve it" (p. 338). Hence, there can be no stepping outside of history, no critical grounds independent of tradition and no non-arbitrary grounds to which tradition can be held accountable. For Habermas, Gadamer's hermeneutic openness therefore closes down critical dialogue both in terms of disabling the critical constraints Habermas requires to ground his approach and in terms of undercutting Gadamer's own approach. As Wright comments, while Gadamer's model of understanding is put forward as a "dialogue of equals", it is in fact "weighted heavily towards one partner in the dialogue: the past, conceived of as 'tradition'".<sup>144</sup> The problem here is not historicisation – a consciousness that is affected by history and aware of itself as affected by history (hence 'history' cannot be an object because it is already at work in any historiographical attempt to understand it) – but the claim that "there is nothing but history".<sup>145</sup>

The charge that Gadamer claims too much for language comes back to many of the issues I have discussed previously. Rather than (like Habermas) seeing Gadamer as falling into the argument that there is 'nothing outside language', 'that everything can be reduced to language', it is again helpful to turn to more complex positions on language and reality. Fairlamb undertakes a detailed analysis of the Habermas-Gadamer debate about language. Without going over too much of that ground, he claims that the coherence of Gadamer's denial that "anything meaningful is outside language" depends upon the questionable assertion that "all future truth is somehow already within language".<sup>146</sup> Habermas' claim (in Fairlamb's words) that "something works behind the back of language as we now know it" (p. 121) poses a challenge to Gadamer's stance in suggesting that "[n]ot everything is understood or is entailed by the current state of language" (p. 122). Gadamer's hermeneutical openness therefore again closes down critical dialogue.

These examples could as easily be replaced by Gadamerian critiques of Habermas' position. Of significance in this context, is Fairlamb's conclusion that the Gadamer-Habermas debate – "posed as it is between the defense of rational critical grounds and hermeneutic universality – finally fails to frame the proper relation between epistemology and hermeneutics". He continues that,

Gadamer's defense of universal hermeneutic openness and Habermas' defense of rational reconstruction are both legitimate: the error lies in thinking that they are mutually exclusive ... their proper relation is pragmatic complementarity, not opposition. This must be: hermeneutics cannot discover a world that is merely open (i.e. without formal conditions), and formal conditions do not constitute total theoretical closure (i.e. without an indeterminacy of interpretation) (pp. 130-131)

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144 "History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction", p. 95.

145 Fairlamb, *Critical Conditions*, p. 130.

146 *Critical Conditions*, p. 121. Further references will be in the text.

... Habermas and Gadamer are each unwittingly *doing* what the other one is idealizing, securing *both* openness and formal conditions at the same time. (p. 132)

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This is to deliberately highlight the *tension* between positions such as Habermas' and Rorty's (and Habermas' and Gadamer's), one seemingly pulling towards collective interests and the other seemingly pulling towards individual interests. The point is that we cannot choose between collective and individual interests, just as we cannot choose between the notion that "[h]umans are essentially good, and that they only have to be assisted to act according to their nature" and the notion that "[h]umans are essentially bad, and they must be prevented from acting on their impulses".<sup>147</sup> Instead, what we have is human freedom – the openness of the ethics (and politics) of freedom – and human responsibility. We cannot escape "responsibility, decision, and choice" and the problem (a problem for which there is no final 'solution') is to "live this perpetual uneasiness in a way which we 'gesture in opposite directions at the same time', where we keep alive the distance of questioning and are prepared to act decisively 'here and now'" (Bernstein, p. 215).

To summarise my critical approach in this thesis then, I do not suggest that these theorists' different positions can be finally brought together in some overarching theoretical perspective, rather it is more important to look at ways in which they *complement* and are *in tension* with each other in order to open up dialogue (encourage free inquiry based on validity claims admitting of argument and counter-argument), as well as at times disrupting that dialogue (looking at how appeals to dialogue contain their own hidden violences). This explains why both Habermas and Rorty (as with other critics) can appear to be 'opening up' and 'closing down' dialogic space at the same time, and accounts for the framing of the sub-titles of my Chapters 2 and 4 as questions rather than statements.

'The Other' has something to say to us to contribute to our understanding – hence the title of my thesis highlights how 'other' literatures and critical discourses on those literatures (such as child literature and child literature theory<sup>148</sup>) have been excluded, silenced and pushed to the margins. As Bernstein observes (drawing on Derrida and Levinas), "it is only through an engaged encounter with the Other ... that one comes to a more informed, textured [comprehensive, critical] understanding of the traditions to which 'we' belong. It

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<sup>147</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>148</sup> Two interesting essays on 'the Other' from the perspectives of child critical theory and feminist critical theory are Nodelman's "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature", pp. 29-35, and Susan Bordo's "The Feminist as Other", *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 27, nos. 1-2 (1996), pp. 10-27.

is in our genuine encounters with what is other and alien (even in ourselves) that we can further our own self-understanding" (pp. 66-67). The logic here, as Bernstein expresses it, is "both/and" rather than "either/or". It is not the logic in which "all differences and oppositions are ultimately reconciled. In short, there is both sameness and radical alterity, symmetry and asymmetry, identity and difference in my relation with 'the Other'" (p. 72). My concern has therefore been not so much with adult (literature/theory) or child (literature/theory) as with adult (literature/theory) and child (literature/theory) or rather 'adultchild (literature/theory)' and 'childadult (literature/theory)'. Some of the problematic aspects of child critical theory are just as evident in critical theory in general and 'the adult/adults issue is just as problematic as 'the child'/children issue. While issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, culture and history are of increasing concern to theorists, issues of age-role, and child age-roles specifically, appear to have been largely ignored/silenced, viewed as different, separate and to be excluded (there remains much work to be done in this area, and I signal a number of directions for further study in my conclusion to this and the next chapter).

While in my next section the parallels and divergences (commonalities and differences) between feminist critical theories and child critical theories are very clear and insightful (there is much 'to-and-fro play of dialogue'), it says a great deal about this broader criticism, theory and philosophy ('outside' feminist and child critical theory) that these parallels with and divergences from child critical theory, while present, are not as clear. The 'to-and-fro play of dialogue' between these theorists and child (age-role) theorists has barely begun or rather has tended to be all one way. This is perhaps what lies behind feminist concerns about the dominant discourse taking over the terms of the debate (even in the call for greater dialogue), being the dominating voice (recall the feminist critique of Habermas' approach, for instance<sup>149</sup>). Where, for example, have theorists (Bernstein, Rorty, Gadamer) engaged with age-role issues?

I have therefore emphasised in this thesis the need to engage dialogically with other critical approaches – to be critical and comprehensive in one's approach, to listen and be responsive to what the other is saying, to seek out both *commonalities* (without denying the otherness of the other) and points of *difference* (without dismissing the other). It is important to note, however, that *how* I/we/other critics perceive these approaches to be in tension and complementary to one another can only ever be a temporary resting point: "[t]here are no algorithms for grasping what is held in common and what is genuinely different. Indeed, commonality and difference are themselves historically conditioned and shifting" (Bernstein, p. 66). While, as Bernstein observes, "this commonality" (how these critical approaches appear to complement one another) is frequently "*violently*

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<sup>149</sup> See my footnote 69. On a similar point, see the feminist critique of Rorty's approach at my footnote 151 below.

imposed" (p. 51), we can neither "give up the need and desire for reconciliation" nor "openness to new, unexpected, contingent ruptures. Reconciliation/Rupture is the space in-between the new constellation – the space that is the *topos* in which critique thrives" (p. 319).

This is to make a central point for this thesis and to conclude this section – but in advocating a dialogic approach *and* a rhetoric of disruption, searching out complementarities *and* tensions, "reconciliations" *and* "ruptures", is not my concluding argument a bit 'wishy-washy', too accepting of Bernstein's (via Levinas, Habermas and Derrida) enframing of the plurality of conversations in terms of his particular type of conversation, and have I not also enframed the conversations of Bernstein (and Habermas, Derrida, Norris, Rorty and so on) in terms of my own particular type of conversation? Enframing of others' arguments is inevitable, no matter how self-critical one seeks to be, but the other points merit a response.

What happens, for example, when dialogue breaks down? Who gets to change the conversation? What sort of power impositions does it hide?<sup>150</sup> What individuals, communities, classes, sexes and *age-groups* are refused participation in the conversation? The appeal to dialogue can mask and exclude areas of non-dialogue. Hence, as I have suggested, the importance of a rhetoric of disruption in addition to a dialogic approach.

The absence of women's voices, excepting my own, in this conversation to date bothers me. Feminist theorists are notably absent in my list of Rorty, Derrida, Levinas, Habermas, Gadamer, Bernstein and Norris (as are child literature theorists and children's voices). My aim in this thesis has been to engage with various critical approaches, not to reach some final agreement but to see if, in dialogue with these approaches, I can move towards a more *comprehensive* and *critical* account of the concepts that have been of concern in this study: language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers (hence the sub-title of this chapter). It appears to me that feminist critics, in facing up to the difficult question of what is 'woman'/what are women, have had to articulate a more comprehensive account of these concepts (because of seeking to broaden the terms of the debate) and a more critical account of these concepts (because they have come under such heavy critique). My brief discussion on

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<sup>150</sup> As Susan Bickford observes, "[w]hat makes an explanation persuasive is the extent to which it taps into our feelings of human solidarity (in Rorty's phrasing); in other words, the extent to which we empathize, or recognize a commonality with ourselves. The unpleasant implication of this is that 'deeping our sense of community' could also read 'requiring others to be like us before allowing them to participate in our conversation'", "Why We Listen to Lunatics: Antifoundational Theories and Feminist Politics", *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Special Issue: Feminism and Pragmatism, vol. 8, no. 2 (1993), p. 106.

feminist theory therefore serves both to act as a necessary rhetoric of disruption<sup>151</sup> and to tighten up my concluding argument.

### SECTION THREE

#### Feminist theorists

In the following discussion, it is important to emphasise that feminist theory is not only engaged in gender critique but has also made a significant contribution to general cultural critique, providing powerful challenges to (and insightful ways of looking at) conceptions of the individual subject, ethics and politics, disciplinary boundaries, questions of language and meaning, and issues such as race, class, history and ethnicity (hence this separate section is not meant to be seen as rigidly dividing feminist theorists from other theorists).

Feminist theories offer an interesting parallel to the scope of positions in child literature theory ranging from those that are more *accepting* of the concept of children and their experiences as a "knowable reality" (to use Lesnik-Oberstein's phrasing<sup>152</sup>) and those that are more *sceptical* of these as a "knowable reality", this range being reflected, for example, in the positions of child literature critics from Leeson, Crago, Chambers, Stephens and Hunt through to Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein ("all 'children' are constructions and inventions" [p. 168]).

In feminist theory, this scope of positions ranges from "feminist empiricism" and "feminist standpoint" through to "feminist postmodernism" (I will define these terms shortly),<sup>153</sup> this range being reflected in the work, for example, of Nancy Hartsock

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151 Feminist critics, such as Dorothy Leland, have observed that to focus on conversation, as Rorty does, is to dedicate oneself to the values internal to conversation: the commitment to continuing the conversation, for example. But this is problematic for feminists who want to leave open the possibility that "disrupting or otherwise *not continuing* the conversation of the West will better serve goals of social harmony and justice", "Rorty on the Moral Concern of Philosophy: A Critique from a Feminist Point of View", *Praxis International*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1988), p. 273.

152 Lesnik-Oberstein suggests that "[c]hildren's literature criticism can be roughly divided up into different branches according to the extent to which the critics involved regard the child as a construction or a knowable reality" (p. 36).

153 Sandra Harding defines these terms in *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 24-29. These terms have been much used by later feminist theorists. Kathy Ferguson's alternative terms for these positions are "*interpretation* (articulations of women's experience and women's voice) and *genealogy* (deconstructions of the category of women)", *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. x. Similarly, in terms of feminist *literary* theory, Toril Moi describes this division as being between 'sexual' and 'textual' politics, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985). In this way, Moi draws attention to the debate between those critics focusing on the images of women in literary texts, as well as on women's writing and women readers' experiences of the book ('sexual politics' being empirical and activist, and reflecting practical politics, historical context and empathetic reading) and those critics focusing on

(women's experience makes "available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy"<sup>154</sup>), Harding, Haraway, Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, through to Flax ("none of us can speak for 'woman' because no such person exists"<sup>155</sup>).

This scope of positions is encapsulated in the so-called women/'women' question in feminist theory, a question that I would like to discuss both in terms of its significance in feminist theory, and its implications as I see them for child critical theory. Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of women/'women' have lead to some uneasiness in feminist theory as if the indeterminacy of 'women' might ultimately result in the failure of feminist politics. This highlights the interesting situation in child literature theory where critics such as Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein, in questioning the 'knowable reality' of 'children', have in fact gestured towards the failure, the *impossibility*, of 'children's fiction' (Rose) and of 'children's literature criticism' (Lesnik-Oberstein). No alternative notions are offered such as a 'child literature' or a 'child literature criticism'.

The following discussion explores some parallels and divergences between feminist theory and child critical theory. A number of child literature theorists – Hunt,<sup>156</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein<sup>157</sup> and Beverly Lyon Clark,<sup>158</sup> for example – have recently considered this area. However, their discussions have been brief and have not touched upon the specific issues that I am about to outline. My readings in feminist theory suggest that a rich area of dialogue is possible between feminist theory and child critical theory. (I should clarify that my interest here is specifically in the parallels/divergences between feminist theory and child literature theory, and not in the feminist criticism *of* child literature, something that I will come to later).

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the linguistic strategies of the texts themselves (how assumptions about gender roles inform texts, for example).

154 "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism" in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, eds. Harding and Merrill Hintikka (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983), p. 284.

155 "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12, No. 4 (1987), p. 642. Flax's later works develop more sophisticated arguments for psychoanalytical and postmodernist feminist theories.

156 "In terms of children's books, I shall be advocating a new critical approach: 'childist' criticism, as a parallel to 'feminist' criticism", *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 16.

157 "[A] comparison with a better-known and more widely discussed area of meaning-construction emphasizes the particular position of childhood: feminism has, after all, long since addressed the concept of 'woman' ... We also see within feminism the same debate about 'woman' as a self-evident, biologically determined category, contrasted with the view of 'woman' as a constructed discourse" (p. 29).

158 "Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers?: The Uneasy Relationship of Feminist Theory and Children's Criticism", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol 18, no. 4 (1993), pp. 171-176.



I want to conduct something of a dual discussion here. Accordingly while my principal discussion is feminist theory, each time I refer to terms such as 'women', 'sex', 'gender' and 'feminist theory', I would ask the reader to also think about the implications of replacing them with terms such as 'children', 'age', 'age-role' and 'child critical theory/child literature theory' (I will clarify my use of these terms shortly).

Feminist theory has emphasised the important distinction between 'sex difference' and 'gender-roles' in terms of the concept of women. 'Sex' (male or female) is a biological difference whereas 'gender' emphasises the socially (culturally, historically) constructed concept of women and men: the 'gender-ing' process.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, a child literature theory could point to the difference between 'age' and what I have termed 'age-roles' in regard to the concept of 'children'. 'Age' (1, 2, 3 ... 65, 66, 67 ...) is a biological and experiential difference (speaking here in terms of quantity of life experience) whereas 'age-role' emphasises the socially (culturally, historically) constructed concept of children: the 'age-role-ing' process.<sup>161</sup> There are, however, two obvious problems with drawing such close parallels.

First, while the differences between males and females is biological (as well as socially-constructed), the differences between adults and children (leaving gender aside here, that is, the differences between male and female adults and male and female children) is biological *in a different sense* (an issue of physiological im/maturity rather than physiological difference) and experiential (as well as being socially-constructed, defined, for example, by family relationships). This has implications in terms of adults having to nurture, shelter, provide for and educate children, and in terms of children's lesser quantity of life experience compared to adults'. I am not quite sure where this point leaves us. I do not think it knocks out the relevance of focusing on something that I have called the 'age-role-ing process', something on which child literature critics focus in terms of

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159 This is to rework Ferguson's question, "[h]ow can we simultaneously put women at the center and decenter everything, including women?", *The Man Question*, p. 3.

160 This of course is to over-simplify the concept of 'sex difference' and its relationship with 'gender'. As Flax observes, "the mere existence of such anatomical differentiation is a descriptive fact, one of many observations we might make about the physical characteristics of humans", "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", p. 636. She continues that "both men's and women's understanding of anatomy, biology ... is partially rooted in, reflects, and must justify (or challenge) preexisting gender relations" (p. 637). See also, more recently, Butler: "[s]exual difference ... is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices", *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 1. The sex/gender distinction suggests a discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally-constructed genders.

161 Again, there is a similar problem with the over-simplification of the concept of 'age difference' as there was with 'sex difference', in terms of suggesting a discontinuity between *aged bodies* and *culturally-constructed age-roles*.

looking at the construction of 'children' and 'childhood' in literature but not, however, specifically under the auspices of 'age-role' construction. (This concept has been perhaps more directly explored from the perspective of other disciplines: sociology, education, medicine, psychology, history, economics, linguistics and so on.) I would suggest that any notion of a so-called 'childist' (literary) theory would have to explore this point in much greater detail and with much greater clarity. There has also been, as I will discuss later, some discussion about feminist theory's (non)treatment of 'age-roles' both in general (in terms of children, teenagers, the elderly) and, more specifically, in terms of *gendered* 'age-roles'.

Second, there is the more fundamental problem in equating a childist (literature) theory with feminist theory. Feminism is a politics (a political movement) and also a theory (a theoretical movement). Of course 'childism' could be so but is it at this point in time? Feminist theory (whether empiricist, standpoint or postmodernist) is critical of theorists who ignore gender issues in discussing literature, history, politics, economics, and other areas. Similarly, childist theory might be critical of theorists, including feminist theorists, that ignore 'age-role' issues in discussing (child) literature and other areas. Behind feminist theory, however, lies an extensive history of political engagement, and argumentation and discussion (on key issues such as gender, sex-difference, the body, the Modernity/Postmodernity debate, and epistemological questions concerning the nature of meaning, the concept of the 'subject' and the status of ethical and political critique), and behind feminist empiricism and standpoint theory lie women as commentators, speaking about themselves and the experiences of other women.

The same cannot be said of a childist theory at this point in time. There is no clearly apparent history of children's political engagement. And adults as commentators (adults speaking about children) rather than children as commentators (children speaking about themselves and the experiences of other children) often lie behind empirical studies of children's experiences of texts. No history of a children's liberation movement has been written up or discussed. Certainly, several key adult childist critics (in the same way that there could be said to be men practising feminist theory) might be reinterpreted within such a tradition (and there could be important *child* childist figures) but there is currently no articulated tradition or discussion. (I am aware, however, that to make references to an absence of an articulated tradition or discussion is to speak from my adult perspective and of [typically] adult forms of communication, conceptualisation and argumentation.) This area is difficult because children are so much under adults' necessary 'protection' (and control). While children may be voicing some kind of 'political' concerns about abuses

of, or distortions arising from, that protection<sup>162</sup>, this is not always a clearly apparent voice (this may be because it is not a strong voice or because these concerns are not being articulated in ways familiar to adults or because of a filtering [out] effect by virtue of a dominating adult presence). Similarly, adults may be talking about the 'age-role-ing' process and the construction of 'children' but again it is not clearly evident that this constitutes childist theory. Of course this reference to the *adult* also raises epistemological issues, as I will discuss later, about what it means for 'children' to speak as opposed to 'adults' and, similarly, for 'women' to speak as opposed to 'men'.

Lesnik-Oberstein has made a similar observation concerning this issue: "whereas the female other may, through feminism, struggle towards equality with men, self-definition, and subject status, this option is not open to the child in the adult-child hierarchy" (p. 34). However, while this reflects some of the concerns that I have raised here, I would not rule out these areas quite so absolutely as Lesnik-Oberstein. While children may not perhaps achieve 'equality' (whatever this term might mean) with adults (because of the inherent 'protective' nature of the adult-child relation), why does this preclude achieving some sort of "self-definition and subject status"? In challenging the notion of a child liberation movement comparable to feminism, she also asks, "[i]s there a freedom appropriate to the 'child'? What type of freedom would this be? Is a protective stance always repressive? Is the withdrawal of protection always a liberation?" (pp. 139-140). These apparently impossible-to-answer questions, however, imply a non-dynamic, historically stable adult-child relationship where the level of freedom and protection appropriate to children never changes, pass over more complex and subtle issues, and close down an important and valuable area of discussion for the discourse.

Lesnik-Oberstein also states that, "whereas most self-other relationships are based on ostensible differentiation of self from other, every adult has, in some sense or other, been a child" (p. 34). It is unclear to me why this detracts from the parallels between feminist theory and child literature theory. It complicates the parallels certainly but she implies that because adults have been children, they can never be 'other' to the child (in the way that women can be 'other' to men). This in turn suggests that adults clearly retain this link with being children rather than the possibility of this being blurred with adulthood. This again suggests that what it means to be a child is unproblematic, that anyone who was once a child somehow retains an unproblematic and uncomplicated appreciation of what was to be a child. It also overlooks the question of whether children who have not yet been adults can be 'other' to the adult. Consider too, the question in post-colonial theory of a person who has experienced say both Indian and Swedish cultures being unable to

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<sup>162</sup> These might range from concerns about age-role-stereotyping or, more topically, the need for visible advice and help for children being abused by adults or, in the specific area of child literature, the absence of child authors and child critics.

sense cultural 'otherness' in relation to these two cultures because he/she has lived in both countries. Again, Lesnik-Oberstein appears to pass over more complex and subtle issues.

It is an important point for this thesis that adults have been children (as well as that there is no clear division between adulthood and childhood and that adults define and redefine their experiences of childhood throughout their lives<sup>163</sup>) but this does not rule out, as Lesnik-Oberstein rules it out, the many issues concerning cultural 'otherness' raised by feminist theory that are relevant to child literature. Rather, as I will discuss shortly, I want to take this point further to question the notions of 'children's literature' and 'children's literature criticism' in terms of the relationship between adults and children, arguing that these are better expressed as '(adults') child literature' and 'child literature theory'.

Hence there needs to be a much broader discussion on the notion of a 'childist' theory, for such a term cannot be deployed as easily as Hunt believes it can.<sup>164</sup> This is not, however, to shut down the possibility of a future case for a childist theory as do Lesnik-Oberstein and Paul, to declare such a term impossible. To *simply* employ the term 'childist' would create confused divisions in a criticism already confused by the children/'children' question, and blur some of the issues that I am trying to bring to the fore concerning *adults'* participation in child literature. I will therefore continue to use the terms 'child literature theory' and 'child critical theory' (so advocating a focus on age-role construction, as well as on many other issues, within such theory), and not specifically at this point a 'childist literature theory' and a 'childist theory' with *all* that I think these terms demand and merit.

I now want to return to the three terms employed by Harding: 'feminist empiricism', 'feminist standpoint' and 'feminist postmodernism'. 'Feminist empiricism' seeks to provide empirically more adequate and theoretically less partial and distorted descriptions. Such an approach therefore inevitably raises broader epistemological issues about the status of scientific 'facts' – including the suggestion that feminists as a group are more likely to produce unbiased results than are nonfeminists as a group – thus seeming to undermine the empirical project. But, as Harding emphasises, empirical feminists are not advocating some form of *value-neutrality* in science (this is rejected because all knowledge is "situated" and can never be value-free) but a greater commitment to

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163 As Rose comments, "childhood is something in which [adults] continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind" (p. 12).

164 Lissa Paul, like myself, has difficulties with Hunt's term 'childist': "the term sits uncomfortably with me because, I suspect, it maintains them-and-us distinctions", "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows about Children's Literature", rpt. in *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, ed. Hunt, p. 156.

participatory values: "no empirical observations could 'prove' a hypothesis true ... 'Less false' claims are all the procedures of sciences (at best) can generate".<sup>165</sup>

Standpoint feminists are ontologically assertive about women. They maintain that the features of women's experiences are the politically and morally preferable grounding – 'standpoint' – for interpretation. By starting in 'strange' ontological places, standpoint feminism seeks to provide a different (revisionist) picture of a given discipline than was previously available.<sup>166</sup>

Both these positions recall Hunt's comment, discussed in the previous chapter, that "*skilled* work with children" can be "richly informative" (p. 95, emphasis added) (noting that this is children *and* adults engaging in empirical work), with the implication that empirical studies of childrens' experiences of texts could be done better (by changing the ontological starting points of analyses, for example, to look at how children might read the text rather than focusing on the mechanics of adult reading, to provide a different/revisionist picture of child literature).

There are clearly problems with focusing *solely* on women as an ontological given and not on issues of gender construction. It might imply, for example, that such a focus is a specialisation (optional). In this way such feminist work might be ignored and viewed as irrelevant to other issues of the discipline. Similarly, a focus solely on children (analyses of children's lives) and not on age-role construction (the construction of 'children') might see child literature theorists and child literature (continue to be) ignored.

However, it is important to emphasise here that both empirical and standpoint approaches do in fact consider the manipulation and (re)constructions of gender. Harding makes the significant point that, the "*strains of postmodernist skepticism appear in the thought of these theorists, too*".<sup>167</sup> Similarly, concerning 'feminist postmodernism', Marysia Zalewski comments:

[t]here is a huge debate about the essentialist nature of the category of 'woman' in feminist theorising but it is not clear to me that it is necessary to spell out in great detail that women are not real, in the sense of being ontologically prior ... because even feminist post-modernists do not deny the material reality of women's lives, being concerned instead with the construction of women through language. This

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165 "After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and 'Strong Objectivity'", *Social Research*, 59, No. 3 (Fall 1992), pp. 585-586.

166 An early example of standpoint feminism is Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1970) and, in feminist literary criticism, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1979).

167 *The Science Question in Feminism*, p. 27 (emphasis added).

does not imply that women cannot be spoken of or that analysis cannot start from the conditions of women's lives ... After all ... women are also 'women'.<sup>168</sup>

I will come back to these points shortly.

The major criticism levelled at both standpoint and empirical feminism has been its reliance on the category of women as an already constituted and coherent group – not necessarily woman but still women with identical interests regardless of categories such as class, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity and culture, as well as age-role.<sup>169</sup> This implies that women are somehow a homogeneous group prior to the process of analysis, that the notion of gender can be applied universally and cross-culturally, and that women have something inherently unchanging and shared that defines them as women.

This criticism has also raised awareness of the need to acknowledge race, class, culture and sexual orientation issues *within* gender critique, to "decenter the preoccupations of white, economically advantaged, heterosexual, and Western feminists in the thinking and politics of feminists".<sup>170</sup> As Butler concludes, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" and "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities".<sup>171</sup>

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It is interesting that Butler leaves out the point that gender also intersects with 'age-roles', that there is a need to include age-role issues as well as the issues of race, class and so on within gender critique. Feminist theory has recently come in for criticism for this omission. A recent guide to contemporary feminist literary criticism, for example, states that "literary criticism must continually address gender and class and race and sexual preference".<sup>172</sup> As Flax observes, "we still write social theory in which everyone is

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168 "The Women/Women' Question in International Relations", *Millennium: A Journal of International Studies*, 23, no. 24 (1994), p. 420.

169 It is important to point out, however, that recent standpoint and empirical theory has addressed this criticism.

170 Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 13. Susan Bordo observes, for example, that in responding to the "cultural imperative to describe the difference gender makes", gender theorists have often "glossed over" other dimensions of social identity and location, which "when considered, cast doubt on the proposed gender ... generalizations", "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism", *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, eds. Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 461.

171 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.

172 Maggie Humm, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 21. Of course, some feminist theory has considered how gender intersects with (female child) age-roles – see for example, Marianne Hirsh, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University

presumed to be an adult", we tend to include "almost no discussion of children as human beings ... The modal 'person' in feminist theory still appears to be a self-sufficient individual adult".<sup>173</sup> Such an omission becomes particularly problematic in feminist theory of child literature. The lesson here also for child literature theory is the need to look at the issues of gender, class and race and so on within age role theory.

Paul, for example, suggests that a feminist approach to child literature would "acknowledge the cultural, social and gender differences between readers" but there is no mention of age-roles.<sup>174</sup> Also, somewhat confusingly, Paul writes about child literature as though it were written by children, so that she can talk about child literature in the same terms as she writes about books written by women: "[i]t is almost inconceivable that women and children have been invisible and voiceless for so long" (p. 150). As Lesnik-Oberstein observes, "women *have* been able to become writers, to find voices, whereas most children's fiction is not written by children" (p. 139).

Clarke has called attention to the omission of, what I have termed, 'age-role' issues in feminist theory, noting the "profound ambivalences that mainstream feminists have about children's literature", and that "feminists who theorize marginality have paid virtually no attention to the position of children. Such feminist and cultural critics often address race, gender, class. But not age, not children".<sup>175</sup>

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Can there be a feminist standpoint – women as *a* knowable reality – if women's experience is divided by class, race, culture, age role and sexual orientation? (This issue also has relevance in child critical theory for adults speaking from an *adult* standpoint as well as referring to the categories of 'children' and 'adults' as already constituted and coherent groups regardless of class, race, sexual orientation and culture, as well as gender.) This revisits a major concern of this thesis: how to shift from one 'master voice' (that there is only one standard for sorting belief) but avoid falling into a strongly sceptical position where, because different people/cultures have varying standards for

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Press, 1989) – but as Clark observes, "'the child's perspective' undergoes a curious slippage" in maternal theory, as critics "characteristically mask their ambivalence about children by eliding two meanings of 'child' – as defined by age and as defined by family relationship ... The female child invoked ... [often] turns out to be a woman, an adult speaking as a daughter: not a young human", "Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers", p. 171.

173 "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", p. 640.

174 "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature", p. 156. (Further references will be in text.) See also Paul, "Feminist Criticism: From Sex-Role Stereotyping to Subjectivity", *International Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, pp. 101-112.

175 "Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers: The Uneasy Relationship of Feminist Theory and Children's Criticism", p. 171 and p. 172. See also Clark's "Thirteen Ways of Thumbing Your Nose at Children's Literature", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1992), pp. 240-244.

determining what counts as knowledge (there is no one standard to which they all agree), "each of these (often conflicting) standards that different groups use is equally valid, equally good. There are no defensible grounds for maintaining that any one is better than any other; there can be no one standard for sorting beliefs".<sup>176</sup> Before I explore this point further, I want to briefly turn to Harding's third category, 'feminist postmodernism'.

From one perspective, feminist postmodernism can be viewed as opposing feminist empiricist and feminist standpoint positions. Instead, women are perceived as constructed categories: 'women' rather than women. 'Women' are a social construction and, as the ontological given-ness of women is in question, it is therefore impossible to build analysis simply from women's experiences. As Butler suggests, it is "not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics", feminist theory "ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought".<sup>177</sup> How, for example, 'women' have been consistently evacuated from theory in the discipline (as 'children' were evacuated from early book-centred child literature criticism, for example) or relegated to traditional (domestic) worlds (again there is a parallel here with the relegation of 'children' to innocence).

Contemporary feminist debates over the meaning of women/'women' have led to some concern that the indeterminacy of the concept of 'women' might result in the failure of feminist politics (a politics of *women*). A postmodernist attention to gender, for example, might just as easily "focus on men or masculinity and create the belief that all are equally oppressed and disadvantaged by gender" therefore evacuating the feminist content of such scholarship.<sup>178</sup> A similar attention to age-role might focus just as easily on the elderly and on infants as on children.<sup>179</sup> But perhaps, in terms of child literature theory, how adults represent themselves should be of as much interest as how adults have represented or continue to represent children, for there is a danger of treating the representation of 'adults' as unproblematic where the concept of 'children' has been problematised. There is a need, in the activity of adults making children the objects of knowledge, to submit to questioning the position of knower (adults) as well as the subject of knowledge (children).

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176 Harding, "After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and 'Strong Objectivity'", p. 576.

177 *Gender Trouble*, p. 2.

178 Zalewski, "The Women/'Women' Question", p. 409.

179 As an interesting example of this, see the essay by Myra Pollack Sadker and David Miller Sadker, "Growing Old in the Literature of the Young" in *Now Upon a Time: A Contemporary View of Children's Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 71-97. The Sadkers point to Dahl's 'ageist' treatment of the grandparents in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.



A number of feminist critics have claimed that postmodernism is incompatible with feminist theory but this is clearly to hold fast to an over-simplified characterisation of postmodernism as 'relativist'<sup>180</sup> (although some postmodernist theorists have invited such characterisations as I have discussed previously). Similarly, a number of feminist critics have claimed that standpoint and empirical feminism are incompatible with feminist theory but again, this is clearly to hold fast to an over-simplified characterisation of standpoint and empiricist feminism as 'objectivist' (although again some of these theorists have invited such characterisations).

Without going into the details of their positions (something that is beyond the scope of this chapter), as the following extracts from their work illustrates, other feminist critics, in wanting to open up critical dialogic space, have sought to avoid being drawn into such 'either-or-ism'.<sup>181</sup> And, rather than seeking to bring together the different critical positions – standpoint, empiricist, postmodernist<sup>182</sup> – under some final overarching theoretical perspective, these critics have also commented on ways in which these positions *complement* and are in *tension* with each other, in order to open up dialogue (as well as to disrupt that dialogue):

Butler –

[s]ome efforts have been made to formulate coalitional politics which do not assume in advance what the content of 'women' will be. They propose instead a set of

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180 See, for example, Bordo, as a strong example of this kind of over-simplification: some "poststructuralist thought ... is in danger of discrediting and disabling certain kinds of feminist cultural critique", "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism", p. 459. From the perspective of such theory, Bordo claims that "the template of gender is criticized for its fixed, binary structuring of reality and is replaced by a narrative ideal of ceaseless textual play" (p. 460). Bordo's position is particularly aimed at the "political correct[ness]" (p. 462) she perceives in current postmodernist theory: "I want to question ... the conversion of this insight into *the* authoritative insight, and thence into a privileged critical framework ... that legislates the appropriate terms of all intellectual efforts and is conceived as capable of determining who is going astray and who is going on the right track" (p. 463). This recalls Taylor's less pernicious claim about a tendency to 'change the subject' which I would argue is on the whole a more preferable critique to that of the altogether misleading charge of 'political (in)correctness'. Bordo's critique is based on a claim that poststructuralism resorts to, in her words, "dogma that the only 'correct' perspective on race, class, and gender is the affirmation of difference" (p. 463). The issue here is not that the opposite is preferable but rather that an affirmation of *only* radical difference suggests a reductive position that many poststructuralists do not hold.

181 As Zalewski observes, "the implication that the women/women'/gender conundrum is about choosing between distinct epistemologies and ontologies is somewhat misleading. Focusing on women can instigate criticisms of implicit essentialism: a focus on 'women'/gender, on the other hand, can give rise to fears of a loss of feminist politics. Yet, when these approaches are used ... one might claim that each approach leads to rather similar terrain, one in which women or 'women' are discriminated against and yet one in which it is clear that both men and women are socially constructed. The women/women'/gender debate is a divisive one and yet appears to be based on oppositions and dichotomies that are themselves constructed", "The Women/Women' Question", p. 422.

182 Such terms are often unhelpful in that they quickly enshrine a polarity over which critics divide themselves or are divided.

dialogic encounters by which variously positioned women articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition (p. 14) ... An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure (p. 16);<sup>183</sup>

I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women ... will necessarily produce factionalization, and that 'identity' as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement ... This is not to say that the term 'women' ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that 'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences ... then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory ... To establish a normative foundation for settling the question of what ought properly to be included in the description of women would be only and always to produce a new site of political contest ... This is not to say that there is no foundation, but rather, that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering (pp. 15-16);<sup>184</sup>

Haraway –

[the] problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects ... *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared (p. 187) ... I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges* (p. 188) ... Such preferred positioning is as hostile to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority. But the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision ... The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology ... both [relativism and totalization] deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well (p. 191);<sup>185</sup>

Ferguson –

'mobile subjectivities' ... are the products of interpretation in the sense that they are standpoints of a sort, places to stand and from which to act. But they are also fluid and multiple; they are informed by genealogy's desire to let difference be ... To those readers firmly rooted in either of these metatheoretical positions ('Women's experience is ...' versus 'Stop talking about women'), I may appear to be advocating only the other. But it is this rootedness in one position or the other that I am attempting to problematize. I don't want to give up the tension-filled dialogue between them by making one the primary position and the other a footnote (p. x) ... Advocates often speak as though the two projects were totally separate and

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183 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

184 "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

185 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

antagonistic endeavors, but within the general fabric of feminist thought they appear more often as connected, yet contrasting, themes. Although the relationship between them is not harmonious, conversations are nonetheless possible between them (p. 5);<sup>186</sup>

Flax –

[w]hat follows from the claim that subjectivity is not unitary, fixed, homogeneous, or teleological? It does *not* follow that subjectivity is an empty or outmoded category that we can happily discard along with other modern hangups. To make such a claim would be to privilege one view of subjectivity; if it is not that, it is nothing. It also does not follow that we can make no claims about what we believe to be better or worse ways of being a person. We cannot fall back on reassuring, universal standards to justify our beliefs. However, we can, do, and must make judgements about how to be with and treat ourselves and others ... I have come to advocate multiple, fluid subjectivities (pp. 101-102);<sup>187</sup>

Chantal Mouffe –

[t]he absence of a female essential identity and of a pre-given unity ... does not preclude the construction of multiple forms of unity ... partial fixations can take place and precarious forms of identification can be established around the category 'women' that provide the basis for a feminist identity ... [It is a frequent misunderstanding that] the critique of an essential identity must necessarily lead to the rejection of any concept of identity whatsoever;<sup>188</sup> and

Anne Phillips –

[t]hose feminists who challenge the universalism of traditional political or moral thought do not just fly off in the opposite direction, and they are at their most persuasive not in counterposing the particular to the general, the sexually specific to the universal, but in emphasizing the interplay between the two (p. 27).<sup>189</sup>

These theorists talk of "multiple convergences and divergences", "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections, solidarity and shared conversations" and "mobile subjectivities" that provide "places to stand and from which to act" but which are also "fluid and multiple". They emphasise that the absence of a "female essential identity" does not preclude the construction of "multiple forms of unity": "partial fixations can take place and precarious forms of identification can be established around the category women that provide the basis for a feminist identity". And they argue that "the rifts among women over the content of the term ('women')

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186 *The Man Question.*

187 *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

188 "Feminism and Radical Politics", in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Butler and Scott, p. 381.

189 "Universal Pretensions in Political Thought", in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, eds. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

ought to be safeguarded and prized" and for the acceptance of a "tension-filled dialogue" as part of the "conversation".

All this resonates with the discussion in my previous section. My aim in this thesis has been to explore, in dialogue with many different critical approaches, a more *comprehensive* and *critical* account of the concepts that have been of concern throughout this study: language and meaning, ethics and politics and 'the child' and children. Feminist theory, as a parallel with child critical theory, has been insightful on each of these concepts and particularly insightful for the last of these concepts, in terms of helping to elaborate on a highly contentious issue within child literature criticism: what are 'children'/children? Drawing on these feminist theorists' terms, the absence of an essential identity or pre-given unity for the concept of 'children' does not preclude the establishment of precarious forms of identification around the category children that provides the basis for a children's identity (the same applies to the category 'adults'). Epistemological questions about 'children' lead to questions about the ontological status of children which in turn lead not to outright ontological homelessness but rather to mobile subjectivities, places to stand that are also fluid and multiple. While I have difficulties with the reduction of children's identity to one single position – one standpoint (the notion of '*the child*', for example) – this is not therefore to reject conceptions of identity altogether, and the important work conducted by empiricist and standpoint child theorists in reception theory, psychology, sociology and education. If children are 'children' and adults are 'adults', it seems unnecessary to single out children for ontological annihilation. The recognition that women and children (like men and adults) are socially constructed has not led to an inability to speak or write about men or adults. Child literature criticism has however often accepted as unproblematic the category of adults while questioning the concept of 'children'.

I have therefore been interested in this thesis in (re)locating children and adults in the discipline as well as focusing on the construction of 'children', 'adults' and age-roles – that is, exploring where are children and adults in the discipline and who/what are 'children' and 'adults'?<sup>190</sup>

To conclude this section, I want to turn more specifically to feminist *literary* theory as a way of further focusing my discussion. Feminist literary theory offers many useful strategies for re-reading child literature and child literature criticism. There are a number of areas where feminist literary theory has been active. I would emphasise, in terms of the following discussion, that these strategies are all closely interconnected and are not without problematic terms and assumptions.

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<sup>190</sup> My terms here draw on Zalewski's in "The Women/'Women' Question", p. 408.

First, the issue of a masculine literary history is addressed by re-examining works that have traditionally been considered as 'literary' and accorded higher value. Critics note these texts' patriarchal assumptions and indicate how women in these texts are frequently represented according to prevailing social, cultural and political norms (recalling the importance of issues of class, race, ethnicity, age-role and so on within gendering). Literary history – texts, authors and critics – are re-evaluated under a different set of critical criteria and women's roles in history are reinterpreted (stereotypes and derogatory images).

Parallel strategies here for child literature theory are to address the issues of an adultist and ageist literary history by re-examining canonical works of child literature and literature in general (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Seven Little Australians*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Jane Eyre*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Lolita*, *The Stone Book Quartet*) and to look at how children (and adults) have been represented according to their alignment with, participation in or rejection of prevailing social, cultural and political norms (recalling again the importance of such issues as class, race, ethnicity and gender within age-role-ing). This would be to re-evaluate canonical texts<sup>191</sup> and canonical authors and critics<sup>192</sup> under a different set of criteria (focusing on assumptions about age-roles and age-role construction<sup>193</sup>, on ageist assumptions, and on bringing these different critics, texts, authors and theories into dialogue), and to re-interpret children's (and adults') roles in (literary) history. Of course, focusing on ageist assumptions works both ways, with the possibility of re-assessing canonical works of child literature as stereotyping adults as well as children.

Second, the invisibility of women writers has been addressed and new literary histories have been charted that reinscribe women writers by recovering and reappraising omitted/overlooked women authors, critics and texts (recalling also the importance of

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191 Feminist critics have been active in this area, providing many reinterpretations (too numerous to cite here) of a number of canonical child texts including *The Secret Garden*, *Little Women* and *The Little House on the Prairie*. For a recent study on the child adventure story and how it marginalises women, see Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), particularly pp. 156-202.

192 Theorists/critics such as Humm in feminist literature and Habermas and Rorty in philosophy would be re-evaluated and the question posed why they have ignored age-role issues and yet discussed issues of gender, race and class.

193 Coveney's *The Image of Childhood* is an important early example of a study looking at how the image of childhood was presented in adult literature but there are no titles in child theory (of which I am aware) along the lines of *Childist Literary Criticism*; *Childism/Poststructuralism*; *Child Theory: Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics and Methodology*; *Age Role Politics*; *Age Role and Theory*; or *Writing and Age Difference*. An interesting study of the construction of 'the child' that also takes into account post-colonial issues – the way in which authority over the 'other' (the primitive, the child) is achieved in the name of protecting innocence – is Stephen Slemon's and Jo-Ann Wallace's "Into the Heart of Darkness? Teaching Children's Literature as a Problem in Theory", *Canadian Children's Literature*, 63 (1991), pp. 6-23. See also Nodelman's essay, "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature", pp. 29-35.

issues of class, race, ethnicity and age-role within gendering), the genres in which women have chosen to write (romance, gothic, child literature), and women's oral culture. Hence, this makes women visible, locates women in the discipline and reinterprets their contribution to culture (noting that, while there may be locally preferred themes and contents that feminist texts share in common, there is no special set of topics that defines feminist or women's writing<sup>194</sup>).

Parallel strategies for child literature theory include addressing the issue of the invisibility of child literature writers and critics in terms of broader literary theory and literary history, and the invisibility of child writers and child critics in terms of child literature theory and literary history. This might include recovering and reappraising, in terms of broader literary theory, omitted/overlooked authors (Ethel Turner, Joyce Lankester Brisley), critics (Rose) and texts (*Pippi Longstocking*, *Harriet the Spy*)<sup>195</sup> and, in terms of child literature theory, omitted/overlooked authors (Maria Edgeworth, Blyton, Michael Bond), critics (Rose and standpoint/empiricist critics in education, sociology and librarianship, for example) and texts<sup>196</sup> (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), again recalling the importance of such issues as class, race, ethnicity and gender within age-roleing.<sup>197</sup> Concerning the invisibility of child authors and child critics there remains much work to be done, and the importance of this area cannot be understated.<sup>198</sup> A significant area where work has progressed is in children's oral lore.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, genres such as the fairytale<sup>200</sup> (traditional, popular, contemporary), the school story, poetry,<sup>201</sup>

194 See, for example, Annis Pratt's controversial, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

195 This is where some feminist theory has been active, being concerned with child literature because many of those who write, purchase and critique child literature are women, and seeing child literature, like women's literature, as similarly devalued and peripheral. See Nodelman, "Children's Literature as Women's Writing", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 13, No. 1 (1988), pp. 31-34.

196 Again, feminist theory has been active in this area, reappraising child literature from a feminist perspective, see Kimberley Reynolds, *Girls Only?: Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) and Claudia Nelson, *Boys will be Girls: The Feminist Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991). A particularly interesting recent study is a reappraisal of (pre-teen) girls' romance novels, *Texts of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity and Schooling*, ed. L. K. Christian Smith (London: Falmer Press, 1993).

197 Again, this is where some feminist theory of child literature has been active. See, for example, Mitzi Myers, "Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition", *Children's Literature*, 14 (1986), pp. 31-59 and "Romancing the Moral Tale: Maria Edgeworth and the Problematics of Pedagogy", in *Romanticism and Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. McGavran, pp. 96-128.

198 Important work in this area includes Carolyn Steedman's *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago, 1982). Books by children published earlier this century include Daisy Ashford, *The Young Visitors* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960).

199 Iona and Peter Opie's study, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), is particularly important here.

200 See, for example, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1991).

201 See Morag Styles, "Lost from the Nursery: Women Writing Poetry for Children 1800 to 1850", *Signal*, 63 (1990), pp. 177-205.

fantasy and so on would also be recovered and reappraised. Hence, the point would be to make children and adults as authors, critics and readers more visible, and to reinterpret their contribution both in terms of literary history in general and child literature history. It would then be possible to chart new (general/child) literary histories that reinscribe child and adult authors and critics, breaks down hierarchical genres and rearranges traditional literary periodisation. Strategies might include renaming 'children's literature' as 'child literature', for example; republishing works of child literature as adult books;<sup>202</sup> encouraging critical analyses of child books by critics from outside the field;<sup>203</sup> republishing out of print child literature from other periods<sup>204</sup> and cultures; reporting the experiences of authors as writers of child literature and the child reading experiences of adult critics of child literature<sup>205</sup>; and a more expansive historical picture of children's reading<sup>206</sup> (noting that, while there may be locally preferred themes and contents that child literature shares in common, there is no special set of topics that defines child literature or children's writing).<sup>207</sup>

Third, the problem of the 'feminist reader' is confronted by offering readers new methods and critical practices that are undervalued in 'traditional' criticism, and being careful with the notion that women are a homogeneous group sharing experiences and perspectives and not culturally, historically, ethnically and age diverse.

Again, parallel strategies for child literature theory include confronting the problems of adults and children as readers,<sup>208</sup> and acknowledging and utilising the skilled empirical work by or with readers on their reading experiences and responses, as well as working to improve such work.

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202 The works of a number of authors already appear on both child and adult fiction publisher lists.

203 See, for example, Hunt's "The Mayne Game: An Experiment in Response", *Signal*, 28 (1979), pp. 9-25, where critics from outside the field analysed Mayne's work not knowing that it was published for children.

204 An example here is the republishing by Garland Press of facsimile editions of early child literature, and the republication of the first Australian children's book, Charlotte Barton's *A Mother's Offering to her Children by a Lady Long Resident in New South Wales* (Milton, Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1979).

205 See, for example, Huse, "My Book House as Bildung", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 13, No. 3 (1988), pp. 115-121. Huse reconstructs her childhood reading of Olive Miller's *My Book House* as an influence on her academic career.

206 See M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

207 See, for two different approaches, Nodelman, "Interpretation and the Apparent Sameness of Children's Novels", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1985), pp. 5-20, and Myles McDowell, "Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences", rpt. in *Writers, Critics and Children*, eds. Fox et al., pp. 140-156.

208 Many critics, as I will discuss, have been active in this area. Gender critics have been also active in this area, see M. Barrs and S. Pidgeon, *Reading the Difference: Gender and Reading in Primary School* (1993).

And fourth, space has been created for women as writers, critics and readers, which has encouraged new writing and feminist readers. However, it is important to be aware that there is no mode of reception that typifies a feminist/women's point of view (noting problems, for example, with the notion of an ideal woman reader) and to avoid lumping together new writing with a progressive politics and stylistic and structural conventions (that prevailing norms are patriarchal and that fluid, experimental writing is feminist).

Parallel strategies for child literature theory include creating space for adults as writers, critics and, importantly, *readers* of child literature, and creating space for children as *writers* and *critics*, and readers/receivers of child literature,<sup>209</sup> and so encouraging new writing and age-role aware readers. These strategies might include publishing works of child literature as adult books and publishing books written by children.

The point to make here is that some of this work has been done<sup>210</sup> (as my footnotes attest) but in terms of the argument of this thesis – that the role of adults and children (and of the process of age-role-ing) needs to be better understood – much remains to be done, particularly in dialogue with developments in broader criticism and theory.

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209 A number of studies of early childhood response to literature have been published: see for example Benton *et al.*, *Young Readers Responding to Poems* (London: Routledge, 1988); *I Like This Poem*, ed. Kaye Webb (Puffin: Harmondsworth, 1979); Dorothy White's *Books Before Five* (1954); Dorothy Butler's *Cushla and her Books* (1954) and Hugh and Maureen Crago's *Prelude to Literacy: A Preschool Child's Encounter with Picture and Story* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

210 The diversity of subjects covered in the essays collected together in the *International Companion Encyclopedia for Children's Literature* make this work something of a landmark in this regard.



## Chapter 6

### (Re)Introducing a Critical Discourse on ~~Children's Literature~~ (Adults') Child Literature

Before outlining my remaining areas of interest in terms of contemporary child literature theory, I want to say something about what I will be omitting from this discussion.

There is insufficient scope for me to comprehensively discuss the issue of children as critics and as authors, to consider children's critical commentaries<sup>1</sup> and texts written by children. This remains, however, an area of crucial importance<sup>2</sup> and, in a way, this thesis seeks to foster this area through better clarifying the role of adults and children in the field of child literature. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that the issues with which I have been concerned to date simply disappear with the entrance of children as authors and critics – that the critical comments of children about child books, because they are *supplied* by children, are somehow more 'true' of those books than are adult critical commentaries<sup>3</sup> – or to idealise children as critics as does Eagleton: "[c]hildren make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural'".<sup>4</sup> Nor is it to suggest that, because the readers of child books are mostly children, adults cannot talk meaningfully about such books (after all, adults wrote and are also readers of those books) or that adults cannot write meaningful child literature (after all adults were once children). Rather, my point is that the inclusion of children's critical commentaries, children's experiences of literature and children's writing allows in voices that have usually been shut out, voices that bring with them different perspectives

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1 See, for example, Chambers' discussion of this issue, "Tell Me: Are Children Critics?", *Booktalk*, pp. 138-174. I will, however, be briefly discussing the related area of empirical work on childrens' responses to texts.

2 This is acknowledged by many contemporary critics, see in particular Leeson: "I see little future for the academic critic making an exhaustive study of *angst* in the writings of William Mayne, while I see an ever expanding future for the librarian, the teacher, the parent, above all, the child as critic", *Reading and Righting*, p. 142. Similarly, Hollindale states, "we need a national children's literature ... but also local literatures for particular racial or regional or social or (why not?) sexual groups, and also a literature made by the children themselves", "Ideology and the Children's Book", rpt. in *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Hunt, p. 34. See also Meek, "I want to promote the personal identities, the cultures, the reading histories, the differences of *young* readers – the ones we speak *about* but rarely hear ... we have to learn to read children's writing", "Keeping Company with Wayne Booth - and Others", *Signal*, 62 (1990), p. 112.

3 There is still, for example, the probable continuation of adults' involvement as mediators to take into account, in terms of facilitating children's commentaries on texts and children's writing.

4 *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 34.

on and raise different questions about the nature of reading response and the concepts of 'literature' and 'children'.

There is also not space for me to consider at length empirical work (drawing on such diverse fields as literary theory, education, psychology, linguistics and sociology) on children's reading experiences. However, while I will not be looking at this area in depth, the *issue* of children's reading experiences and work on this area has been of central concern throughout this thesis. My aim has been to argue for the validity and significance of this area of child critical theory. I will briefly review the work of four critics in this area: Crago, Chambers, Tucker and Meek. Stephens, and to some extent Hunt, also combine narrative theory with empirical studies on child readers, as I will discuss later.

### Issues in empirical research: Crago, Chambers, Tucker and Meek

Crago's and Chambers' empirical work with child readers has enabled them to offer a series of different perspectives on the concepts of 'adults/adulthood' and 'children/childhood' (in terms of 'age-role' construction), as well as on the nature of adult and child literature, and adults' and children's reading experiences. While it is important to consider this work, it should not be suggested that the findings of these critics is any more 'correct' because they are based on (adults' interpretations of) children's responses (for there are many problems, both methodological and epistemological, with such empiricist work). However, *skilled* empirical work with children on reading response, in seeking to provide a more comprehensive and critical account, has kept open an important area of dialogue that other child literature critics have been inclined to close down.

Drawing on his own and Maureen Crago's observations and recordings of their daughter's comments on her experience of stories she heard prior to age five<sup>5</sup>, Crago challenges critics who appeal to concepts such as "the response of '*child readers in general*'".<sup>6</sup> "The convenient fiction that children can be so lumped together", he comments, "not only obscured many real differences between the individual responses of individual children, but it also served to deflect the attention of generations of children's literature authorities from bothering to observe those responses at all".<sup>7</sup> Crago has a point

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5 See *Prelude to Literacy: A Preschool Child's Encounter with Picture and Story*. See also Hugh Crago's "Cultural Categories and the Criticism of Children's Literature", *Signal*, 30 (1979), pp. 140-150, as well as more recent work which continues this empirical focus: "Childhood Reading Revisited", *Papers: Explorations in Children's Literature* vol. 1, no. 3 (1990), pp. 99-115; "The Roots of Response", (1985) rpt. in *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, ed. Hunt, pp. 118-129; and "The Readers in the Reader: An Experience in Personal Response and Literary Criticism", *Signal*, 39 (1982), pp. 172-182.

6 "Cultural Categories and the Criticism of Children's Literature", p. 148 (emphasis added). Further references will be in the text.

7 "A Signal Conversation", p. 129. This stance manifests itself, as Crago points out, in such areas as the rigid age-group classifications that critics and educationalists specify for different child

here, as my discussion on child literature criticism in previous chapters attests. He also queries the notion that children can suffer "intellectual harm by 'premature' exposure to unregulated vocabulary, complex ideas [and] ambiguous plot-resolutions" (p. 147). While some work with child readers might suggest that they do not prefer unresolved endings, Crago emphasises that this overlooks the fact that, in the past, "our creative and publishing practice has denied many readers the chance to experience anything but the simplified. Naturally, then, the unsimplified may strike an unprepared reader as boring or puzzling so that she rejects it" (p. 148).

Generalising about what 'children in general' like, as Crago concludes, "lends itself perfectly to a projective notion of childhood: to a concept of childhood that is a repository for adult hopes and fears".<sup>8</sup> Hence, Rose's, Lesnik-Oberstein's and my own interest in exploring what might be adults' investment in various images of the (generalised/idealised) child. However, as I will discuss, Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein miss out on the insights offered by Crago's and other empiricist critics' work because they dismiss (Rose) and treat reductively (Lesnik-Oberstein) the empirical area of study. I agree with Crago that, "[c]lose observation and recording *over time* of what children actually say and do in response to books is an important corrective to the tendency to look for, and find, only evidence that supports and confirms our own ideas of what children are like, and how they think about literature".<sup>9</sup> Certainly there are problems with such work<sup>10</sup> (in terms of, as I have suggested, epistemological<sup>11</sup> and related methodological

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books, assuming that a particular age group of 'children in general' (regardless of issues of gender, literacy level, socio-cultural background and so on) will or will not like a given book.

8 "A Signal Conversation", p. 129.

9 "A Signal Conversation", pp. 129-130.

10 While Crago is properly self-critical about some of the inbuilt limitations of his methodology and data, other limitations remain unacknowledged (hence perhaps explaining in part Rose's difficulties with such work). Drawing on his empirical work, for example, Crago suggests that critics, in articulating their own response to texts, should not "conceal [their] doubts, questions and private gratifications" and, by not concealing these, critics' responses will be "a fuller, more emotionally authentic and hence a more *childlike* response ... it will approximate more closely to the response of the child reader I once was. It will be harder for me to project and impossible for me to generalize. The child/adult distinction will cease to operate for me" (p. 149). These statements raise many questions. What is the "emotionally authentic" *authentic to*? – to some kind of 'natural' state or level of response that adults can somehow retrieve through the child? Why is this state/level of response "more childlike"? Why is the child being associated with the 'natural' and 'authentic'? And why should this response "approximate" that of the "child reader I once was"? how can the adult recapture this identity simply by a process of not concealing his/her "doubts, questions and private gratifications"? Crago would therefore appear not to have left off "generalising" or continuing to employ "the child/adult distinction" – 'the child' is the (other) one with the "more authentic emotions". (In a later article, "Childhood Reading Revisited", Crago admits that he overstated this earlier position [p. 99].)

11 "The appeal to what readers 'do'", as Freund observes, "is an appeal to an extremely problematic category because it can never be immediately accessible. What is accessible instead is a *narrative* of what readers do ... it is a hypothesis, an invented construct, for 'experience' ... theories of reading describe experience by staging *representations* of reading, creating narratives of experience in which the reader is assigned a role", *The Return of the Reader*, p. 87. As Culler states, "it proves no easier to say what is in the reader's or a reader's experience than what is in the text: 'experience' is

issues<sup>12</sup>) but this does not mean that such work (particularly skilled work with child readers) should be dismissed outright – even though, as Crago importantly emphasises, we can "never know exactly" how an individual experiences the book.<sup>13</sup>

Another strategy Crago employs in seeking to better understand children's reading experiences is to recall and describe how he used to read when he was a child (this recalls Hunt's strategy of seeking to 'read as a child' might). He records in detail his memories of books not re-read since childhood (acknowledging that this is a distorted and imperfect recall) and then provides an account of his subsequent adult re-reading of that book by way of comparison: "[w]hat was important to us then, but isn't now? What was insignificant then, but has subsequently achieved significance?"<sup>14</sup> Like Hunt (recall his "possibilities and probabilities" [p. 194]), Crago seeks to summarise "some of the patterns" to be found in his empirical data but always asking first, "what are the risks in generalising" and second, "given those risks, what can we tentatively say that *might* be generalisable".<sup>15</sup> This is to move into a difficult area, as I will shortly discuss. As Nodelman observes, "many adults tend to make generalizations about children based on too little information and with too little thought. Worse, while we are trying to guess about how the typical child might respond, we are not paying attention to our own response".<sup>16</sup>

Crago points to the many similarities between adult and child readers' range of responses to texts (while still acknowledging that there are also differences, although differences that need to be re-examined, "many of our conventional ideas about those differences are misleading"<sup>17</sup>). While nobody would deny that adult and child reading responses clearly

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divided and deferred – already behind us as something to be recovered, yet still before us as something to be produced", *On Deconstruction*, p. 82. A point I have been making throughout this thesis is that these epistemological concerns do not rule out such work altogether.

12 There are methodological problems (and the epistemological concerns discussed above are complicated further) in the context of adults mediating (shaping and framing) children's reading responses, raising the issue, for example, of "how much of the response 'belongs' to the child", Crago, "The Roots of Response", p. 123. Meek makes a similar observation, "[l]eft to comment on their own, without the stimulus of a question, children often choose to talk about quite other aspects of a tale than those that preoccupy their elders", "What Counts as Evidence in Theories of Children's Literature", p. 289. See also Michael Benton, "[the] range and combinations of the variables in these studies are enormous: texts, contexts, readers and research methods are all divisible into subsets with seemingly infinite permutations", "Reader Response Criticism", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, p. 75. As I have suggested, *skilled* work in this area, while not solving these problems, addresses some of them. (Crago suggests as one methodological improvement, for example, that transcripts of reading experience should "include *everything said by everyone*", "The Roots of Response", p. 123.)

13 "The Roots of Response", p. 121.

14 "Childhood Reading Revisited", p. 99. This resembles the approach outlined by Hollindale in "Re-Reading the Self: Children's Books and Undergraduate Readers", *Signal*, 79 (1996), pp. 62-74, which reflects on undergraduate students experiences on "re-entering childhood reading" (p. 65).

15 "The Roots of Response", p. 119.

16 *Pleasures of Children's Literature*, p. 9.

17 "Childhood Reading Revisited", p. 99.

differ in many ways, he therefore emphasises that "the very existence of a system of binary categories [adult books and child books/criticism of adult literature and criticism of child literature] encourages us to accept and extend them, to look actively for differences between two categories and not to see what they might have in common".<sup>18</sup> Hence, Crago makes a strong point in emphasising the need for child literature critics to "redefine and incorporate" rather than "delimit and exclude".<sup>19</sup> While many critics have focused on the differences between adult and child readers and adult and child books, Crago's point is that there are also *similarities*, and that in turn these perceptions both of differences and similarities should be open to the broadest possible questioning. That children's experiences of books are different from adults', and that child books might be different from adult books, does not shut out there being *any* similarities between them. Frequently, an 'either-or-ist' tendency dominates where children, their reading responses and child books are perceived as being completely-different-from or absolutely-the-same-as when in fact there is a range of positions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Crago echoes here my 'tensions and complementarities' position and points to the importance of a dialogic approach (an approach that includes rather than delimits and excludes) as well as a rhetoric of disruption (that redefines) in order to open up discursive space. This brings me to Chambers' work.

With his later work, *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Children and Literature* (1985)<sup>20</sup>, Chambers moves away from reader-response literary theory (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) into education theory. However, in exploring the area of how adults and children respond to books, he touches upon a range of important issues that, as I will discuss, have also been pursued by critics such as Hunt.<sup>21</sup> In particular, Chambers sets out a comprehensive and interesting framework for 'booktalk' with children, in terms of better understanding child readers' experiences of texts.<sup>22</sup> There are many other relevant and significant education-related studies of children's experiences of literature (directed at improving the teaching of literature and at reading pedagogy) that I can only list here.<sup>23</sup>

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18 "Childhood Reading Revisited", p. 142.

19 "A Signal Conversation", p. 124.

20 See also Chambers' *The Reading Environment* (South Woodchester: Thimble Press, 1991) and *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk* (South Woodchester: Thimble Press, 1993).

21 Chambers states, for example, that the "first question I ask [when I read a child book] is *not*, 'Will children like this book?' The first question, it seems to me, should be, 'What happens to me as I read this book?' I am still surprised at how difficult it is for most children's-book professionals to disengage from an immediate attempt, as soon as they pick up a book, to put some representative child in front of them as they read. All this does is act as a barrier to their own understanding, and therefore to their assessment. So first, read; and as I read I am ... tape-recording my response as I go", *Booktalk*, p. 31. This is essentially Hunt's approach.

22 See *Booktalk*, pp. 170-173.

23 See, for example, *Reader Stance and Literary Understanding: Exploring the Theories, Research and Practice*, eds. J. Many and C. Cox (1992); Michael Benton and G. Fox, *Teaching Literature 9-14* (1985); *Researching Response to Literature and the Teaching of Literature: Points of Departure*, ed. C. R. Cooper (1985); and "Response to Literature: Empirical and Theoretical Studies", eds. H. Agee and L. Galda, *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1983),

Turning next to Tucker, his work takes as its model the sequential developmental stages in the child's cognitive faculties posited by psychiatrist Piaget, exploring how these developmental stages connect books to children.<sup>24</sup> While many critics have questioned Piagetian theory, Tucker is involved in an even more problematic exercise in seeking to apply this contested theory to child readers and child literature:

following Piaget, I shall chiefly describe the more typical ways in which children seem to approach and make sense of their stories at various ages ... enough is now known about child development to allow for at least some generalisations about how young readers are most likely to think and feel at certain ages in various particulars, and to what extent this sometimes affects their choice of favourite literature.<sup>25</sup>

Meek has also been an important advocate of empirical research on children's reading responses, continuing on from her landmark work in child-centred criticism as discussed in Chapter 2.<sup>26</sup>

That I have not discussed these empirical studies in depth or conducted any empirical work with child readers myself is not to rule out *drawing on* the work undertaken by critics in this area.<sup>27</sup> There is a need to listen to children as readers and critics, and to critics working in this area, as a way of opening up the discussion. I maintain, as Hunt has also observed, that "*skilled* work with children can be richly informative" and, while there are difficulties with empiricist work on children as readers, I question Rose's dismissal of this area and Lesnik-Oberstein's argument that "adult critics' defining of the 'child' cannot be formed or disrupted by any children's own voiced opinions or ideas because these are interpreted – selected or edited ('heard') – by adults for their purposes and from their perspectives".<sup>28</sup> It has therefore been my intention to engage with empirical work on children's reading experiences, while acknowledging the problems with such

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pp. 8-75. Many of these studies are influenced by the work of Louise Rosenblatt (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* [1978] and *Literature as Exploration* [1938]), who Benton suggests has had "greater influence upon the actual teaching of literature and our understanding of children as readers than those of any other theoretical writer", "Reader-Response Criticism", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, p. 74.

24 See Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

25 *The Child and the Book*, pp. 5-6 and p. 20. Tucker constantly states that his conclusions are "tentative", given that "individual responses to the experience of reading are often diverse in a way that will always defeat any attempt to be overprescriptive" (p. 3). However, he frequently undermines these good intentions in relying upon what he perceives to be unproblematic facts (as put forward by Piaget) about child development. I will briefly return to Tucker's work and Piaget's influence when I discuss Hunt's work.

26 See in particular Meek's "What Counts as Evidence in Theories of Children's Literature" and, more recently, "Keeping Company with Wayne Booth – and Others", pp. 104-113.

27 An interesting essay in this context is Rod McGillis' "The Child is Critic: Using Children's Responses in the University Classroom", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1985), pp. 4-6.

28 "Defining Children's Literature and Childhood", *International Companion Encyclopedia*, p. 21.

work. Like Robert Holub, I would maintain that empiricism does have an important and valid place in the literary theory of *all* literature but that it has all too often been abused, "transformed into a dogmatic method claiming exclusive access to truth".<sup>29</sup> Holub comments:

[i]f empirical research in the future is to play a useful role in larger critical projects involving response and effect, it will have to assume a more modest and ancillary function ... Looking at the composition and habits of different readerships can supply information that helps clarify the entire literary process ... Purged of its absolutist notions about objectivity and applied in a judicious manner ... empirical studies could become a boon ... for our understanding of the literary text and its reception. (pp. 145-146)

Similarly, while I am not going to separately consider the substantial body of work (undertaken by sociologists, historians, psychologists, linguistics, political theorists, educationalists and so on) on adults' and children's histories and life experiences, this area has been and continues to be of concern throughout this thesis in terms of what literary critics, drawing on these other disciplines, have said about these areas. (I will therefore briefly touch upon such work when I discuss the critical theories of Hunt, Stephens, Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein.) While there are difficulties with 'standpoint' work on children (on their lives and experiences), I again question aspects of Rose's and Lesnik-Oberstein's argument that "all 'children' are constructions and inventions" (Lesnik-Oberstein, p. 168). In the context of my discussion of feminist theory, while there is "a huge debate about the essentialist nature" of the categories of 'woman' and 'child' in theorising, it is not clear that it is "necessary to spell out in great detail" that women and children "are not real", that women and children "cannot be spoken of or that analysis cannot start from the conditions of [their] lives". After all, 'women' and 'children' are also women and children.<sup>30</sup> I will pursue this point further in this chapter.

### Issues in poststructuralist theories: Hunt and Stephens<sup>31</sup>

I have already discussed Hunt's work at some length and have made most of the points that I want to make concerning his work. This chapter will be a way of drawing these comments together. I will start by briefly revisiting the first question with which I was concerned in Chapter 3 – what images of the child and childhood in the book and

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<sup>29</sup> *Reception Theory*, p. 145. Further references will be in the text.

<sup>30</sup> My words here draw on Zalewski's "The Women/Women' Question", p. 420.

<sup>31</sup> Other recent studies on child literature theory include Maria Nikolajeva's *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996). Nikolajeva adopts a semiotics approach, emphasizing the intertextuality of child literature to maintain her central argument that child books are approaching adult literature in their complexity. Meek is highly critical of this study, commenting that Nikolajeva "is persuaded that the mistake critics have made it to confound the study of literature with a concern about children's reading". This indicates Nikolajeva's intent, Meek suggests, "to move away from considerations of social, political and pragmatic aspects of narrative writing", "The Constructedness of Critics", *Signal*, 81 (1996), p. 173.

characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are being privileged by critics? – to further develop my findings. My discussion centres around three issues in the work of Hunt and Stephens: their preference for metafictional texts, concern with 'ideology' and child literature, and combining of narrative theory and empirical studies on child readers.

### *Preference for 'metafictional' texts*

Both Hunt and Stephens privilege a child literature that is, in Hunt's words, "open" and "experimental",

the closed rather than open text in fact deprives the child of the very adventurousness that fiction is vaunted to provide<sup>32</sup>;

it is significant that the whole thrust of those who might be called the true frontierspeople of children's *literature* is for innovative *form*. To break the ideological deadlock which either openly tries to use the book as a social weapon ... or strives to keep the book the same, we must experiment<sup>33</sup> ... children's texts should be mind-expanding and developmental ... they should be 'open' and should confront, not confirm (p. 163);

and, in Stephen's words, "intertextual" and "interrogative",

[i]ntertextuality encourages self-conscious subjectivity because ... it keeps visible the processes of narrative discourses and representation, and because its play of differences functions as a critique of social values ... carnivalesque interrogative [texts] ... temporarily or radically evade, invert or transgress ideologies and structures of authority. By denying simple empathy with characters or situations, and by emphasizing signifying processes, such narratives situate readers outside the text as separate subjects.<sup>34</sup>

(I will use the term metafictional in this chapter by way of shorthand to encompass all these terms.)

While there are merits to Hunt's and Stephens' position in terms of challenging and breaking down limited and limiting conventional stereotypes about what child texts should look like, how children read and what children are capable of understanding,<sup>35</sup> in taking that position they have fallen into a number of traps (see my reference to this area in Chapter 3). This is not therefore to argue that metafictional texts in themselves do not have merit<sup>36</sup> (although I want to probe further the question of what constitutes an

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32 "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", p. 184.

33 *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, p. 153. Further references will be in the text.

34 *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, p. 6. Further references will be in the text.

35 See also other studies in this area by McCallum, "Metafictions and Experimental Work", pp. 397-409, Geoff Moss, "Metafiction and the Poetics of Children's Fiction", pp. 50-52 and Anita Moss, "Varieties of Children's Metafiction", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1985), pp. 79-92.

36 As Crago observed, "our creative and publishing practice has denied many readers the chance to experience anything but the simplified. Naturally, then, the unsimplified may strike an unprepared reader as boring or puzzling so that she rejects it" (p. 147). Similarly, Hunt comments that "by prescribing what the child can understand we create a self-fulfilling prophecy: this is what the child



metafictional text) but more to focus on how critics have conflated this characteristic with 'the child' and a progressive ethics and politics, taken up an oppositional stance whereby metafictional ('open') texts are placed in opposition to classic realist ('closed') texts, and maintained the instability of language and meaning and variety in different readers' responses to the text while simultaneously maintaining the metafictional text as a stable, unchanging entity and therefore shutting down the plural nature of readers' responses.

*(a) Children have a 'natural' affinity with metafictional texts*

In constructing his childist theory, Hunt draws from Tucker's, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration*, and derives from it the following observations: "[children] will be more open to genuinely radical thought ... they will be more flexible in their perceptions of text; and, because play is a natural part of their outlook, they will regard language as another area for playful exploration. They are less bound by fixed schemas, and in this sense see more clearly" (p. 57). It is interesting that these characteristics of 'the child' (of openness, flexibility, language play and being less bound by fixed schemas) match those of the metafictional text. In this way, Hunt is able to bring 'the child' and metafictional texts into very close alignment. 'The child' is constructed as having some kind of natural affinity with such texts. (However, as I will discuss, Hunt's image of 'the child' is based upon a somewhat uncritical acceptance of Tucker's observations, themselves in turn based upon heavily contested Piagetian theories of development that generalise children into easily definable stages. Hunt himself also later undermines the image of the child that he has established here.)

Hunt therefore implies that metafictional texts are somehow closer to the culture of 'the child'. Children, he concludes, are the "true 'deconstructors' of texts, ready to read 'against' texts, to use them as a basis for extravagant readings, free of tiresome constraints of understanding, and hence free to misread (p. 97, emphasis added) – "they are deconstructors *par excellence*" (p. 98). The assumption appears to be that the metafictional text – the text that engages in language play – can, to quote Rose, by "calling attention to its own fabrication", claim to be "language at its most true" (p. 140) and therefore at its most appropriate to children (children for whom "play is a natural part of their outlook" and language is regarded as an "area for playful exploration" [Hunt, p. 57]). Hunt also implies then that there is some 'natural' link between 'the child' and the 'postmodernist'/playful use of language, that, as Rose again observes, "children and [post-]modernism have some necessary relation" (p. 142). Does Hunt's childist fiction, fiction that is metafictional and 'open', really identify with children or is it simply a perpetuation of adults constructing 'the child' to suit themselves? Do children have a

natural affinity with such texts or do they have to be socialised into liking/appreciating such texts? Certainly Chambers implied this was the case, as I discussed in Chapter 3: "younger readers" of Garner's *The Stone Book* (a book acclaimed for its innovative form) "may require the mediation of an adult to enter into such a profound experience".<sup>37</sup> The notion that 'the child' and metafictional texts have some necessary relation appears, as Rose has again pointed out, to "underline the availability of 'the child' as a concept to buttress different arguments and positions in the establishment of our relationship to changing cultural forms" (p. 142). Metafictional child texts are preferred by Hunt and, in order to support his stance that such texts are more *for* children (that children have a natural affinity with such texts), 'the child' has to be re-constructed in support of that preference (as having a natural affinity with such texts).

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I have referred to 'the child' here in scare quotes in order to deliberately highlight an issue that is central to this thesis: whether or not it is possible to discuss the reality of children and how critics' claims to knowledge about this reality are derived (closely related to this issue is whether or not it is possible to discuss children's experiences of texts). This is to return to the children/children' question to which I referred in the previous chapter.<sup>38</sup>

It is on this question that Lesnik-Oberstein's position falls down, while Hunt also encounters a number of difficulties. Hunt's difficulties do not flow from being, as Lesnik-Oberstein would suggest, "tangled up in the assumption of knowledge of the 'real' child (p. 146) or from being tangled up, as I would argue is Lesnik-Oberstein, in the assumption that it is *not possible* to know the 'real' child. Rather, in attempting to *negotiate* the complex children/children' question (and avoid being drawn into an 'either-or-ist' position on this question like Lesnik-Oberstein), Hunt falls into ways of thinking that are sometimes reductive.

As discussed above, Hunt draws on Tucker's study to ground a stable definition of children and children's experiences of texts. Some of the features of the reality of children, as summarised by Hunt, include:

spontaneous play, receptivity to the prevailing culture, physiological constraints ... and sexual immaturity (which implies that certain concepts are not immediately relevant to them). They have the tendencies to form emotional attachments to mature

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<sup>37</sup> "The Reader in the Book", p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> I will be concerned here with 'children/children' rather than with any notion of 'childhood/childhood'. 'Childhood', along with 'adulthood' and 'womenhood', are highly questionable concepts. Hunt rightly rejects a notion of a stable historical definition of the concept of childhood: "the definition of childhood shifts ... just as the understanding of past childhoods shift" (p. 59) - "childhood is not now (if it has ever been) a stable concept" (p. 60). See also Lesnik-Oberstein on this point, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, p. 155.

figures, to be incapable of abstract thought, to have less of a concentration-span than adults, and to be at the mercy of their immediate perceptions. (p. 57)

And some of the features of children's experiences of texts, as summarised by Hunt, include that:

at different stages, children will have different attitudes to death, fear, sex, perspectives, egocentricity, causality, and so on. They will be more open to genuinely radical thought and the ways of understanding texts; they will be more flexible in their perceptions of text; and, because play is a natural part of their outlook, they will regard language as another area for playful exploration. They are less bound by fixed schemas, and in this sense see more clearly. On the negative side ... they have less knowledge about language and book structures; the distinctions they make between fact and fantasy and between the desirable and the actual are unstable; and they are capable of unconscious animism, since the attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects is less controlled than it is in adults. (pp. 57-58)

Several observations need to be made here, including the major point that Hunt relies upon a generalised notion of children (and adults) that smooths out possible differences/issues concerning age-role (he assumes, for example, that these characteristics apply to children at any point in their 'childhood', from six months to sixteen years, and that adults do not share some of these characteristics), culture (children from different cultures will have different attitudes to death and sexuality), history, ethnicity and so on. Hunt implies that children are a homogeneous group and that certain age-role characteristics can be applied universally and cross-culturally. Analyses of children's lives and experiences, as well as lists of characteristics that define children, are contested areas. Why should children be any more knowable than adults? And why are children "more open to genuinely radical thought" than adults? (This tends to cast children as somehow free of the cultural constraints in which we are all [adults and children] enmeshed.) Hunt also at times undermines his own position. While, as quoted above, he at first suggests that "the distinctions children make between fact and fantasy are unstable", he later comments that "children are basically cleverer than adults like to think; and can very well tell the difference between fiction and real life" (p. 164). As discussed, Tucker's work takes as its model Piagetian theories about developmental stages in the child's cognitive faculties but, despite the considerable criticism levelled at that theory<sup>39</sup> (a

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39 There are many empirical and conceptual objections to Piaget's ideas - see, for example, Susan Sugarman, *Piaget's Construction of the Child's Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*. Significant critiques include that Piaget assumes children's actual performance to accurately represent the extent of their potential, and that he constructs a developmental process that privileges adults as the highest level of moral and intellectual achievement, with children's (primitive) thinking developing towards an adult (superior) norm. (This latter critique has also raised gender issues concerning perceived deviations from a privileged male norm.) Critics have also pointed out that Piaget's notion of 'intellectual accomplishment' is not culturally universal, with some other cultures being, like children, consigned to 'primitive' thinking that aspires to a Western adult superior norm. The notion that development occurs as a series of changes from one distinct stage to another has further been challenged in terms of this being a culturally imposed system related more to adult expectations about children.

point noted by Hunt<sup>40</sup>), it is upon this shaky foundation that Hunt proceeds to build his 'childist' theory. Having said this, however, it is important, in referring back to my discussion on (radical) incommensurability, (irreducible) plurality and (anti-) ethnocentrism, to take on board Bernstein's comments that incommensurable cultures/conceptual schemes/reading experiences (of children and adults) can be "compared and rationally evaluated in *multiple* ways".<sup>41</sup> The major problem with Hunt's approach is that he does not *theorise* his concepts, and elaborate upon and engage with these concepts in a critical and comprehensive way. He instead tends to draw upon Tucker's work in an over-reductive manner, claiming a single, unproblematic way of defining, comparing and evaluating 'child culture', rather than acknowledging that there are multiple ways.

While Hunt's notion of the reality of children and children's experiences of texts raises many questions, my point remains that analyses of children's lives and experiences are relevant and important. While we can say something about the reality of children's lives and experiences, we cannot ignore the point that these lives and experiences are complicated by such issues as class, race, culture, age-role, history, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. Hence, while I question the notion of child (like the notion of woman) as *a* knowable reality, I retain the notion of children and advocate the need to engage with analyses of children's lives and experiences (accepting that these analyses are also contingent and contested). As discussed in the previous chapter, there are many useful directions for child literature theory in this context offered by feminist theory in terms of supporting dialogic encounters by which various positioned children (and adults) articulate their experiences. These experiences permit multiple convergences as well as divergences, and provide standpoints that are also fluid and multiple. This is to emphasise a tension-filled dialogue *between* critical positions (empiricist, standpoint, poststructuralist). These positions should not be perceived as separate and antagonistic. (This is to draw upon the terms of the feminist critics I discussed in the previous chapter.)

Hence the importance of Hunt's work in advocating bringing this stable definition of children and children's experiences of texts derived from Tucker's work into dialogue with other critical approaches and, perhaps to a greater extent, the importance of Stephens' work in actively engaging with both poststructuralist and empiricist

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40 Hunt comments, "there is a good deal of dispute as to how far the[se] 'stages' can be recognised" (p. 57). In a review of Tucker's book written several years earlier, Hunt also acknowledges the contested nature of the theories of child development upon which Tucker relies but, despite this, appears to be critical of Tucker for his failure to say something *definite* about the child, questioning, for example, Tucker's "cautious use of the word 'may'" in relation to aspects of the child's development, "A Fine Scepticism", p. 180. Hunt pushes Tucker into a more extreme (reductive) position on defining the reality of children and their experiences of texts, a position into which he himself also seems to be finally drawn.

41 Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 65.

approaches, moving child literature discourse towards a partial, locatable and critical knowledge about children (and adults), and sustaining the possibility of shared conversations. Stephens observes, for example, that "we can never really know what happens when a reader reads" but nevertheless "insist[s] on the existence of some element of determinable meaning" (p. 48). Both Hunt and Stephens have sought to grapple with the difficult and highly complex issues of the reality of children and the nature of their reading experiences while recognising that these are contested issues, although they have at times closed down elements of their discussion. Drawing again on the words of Mouffe, the absence of a child/adult essential identity or pre-given unity does not preclude the construction of multiple forms of unity. Partial fixations can take place and precarious forms of identification can be established around children and adults.

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*(b) Metafictional/'open' texts placed in opposition to 'classic realist'/'closed' texts*

There are additional difficulties with Hunt's and other critics' use of terms such as 'open' and 'closed' to characterise different sorts of texts, and with their references to so-called 'classic realist' texts, something that I have been discussing throughout this thesis. Hunt, Stephens and Rose are deeply suspicious of a critical discourse that privileges a 'classic realist' aesthetic (leaving aside here for the moment the questions raised about the use of this term). Hunt states, for example, that "the form of the classical-realist novel, for all its dominance, should be challenged" (p. 163).<sup>42</sup> And Stephens observes that "interrogative texts may be apt to employ narrative structures which do not lead to that form of closure which in classic realism is also a final disclosure of theme, moral or transcendent signified" (p. 124).<sup>43</sup> My detailed study of book-centred critical discourse on child literature in Part One provides many examples to support the claims of Rose, Hunt, Stephens and other critics that texts employing a particular set of conventions, and a critical discourse that privileged such conventions, had taken a central place in the genre. Where Rees was critical, for example, of Dahl's books, it was because they were: "two dimensional" and "unreal"<sup>44</sup>, "fake" (p. 194), "sham" (p. 197) and had "loose ends" (p. 198), and where he was positive about Dahl's books it was because they were "convincing" and "believable" (p. 199). Only Dahl's "realistic pieces" contained "good

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- 42 Hunt also comments that, "the one area of children's literature which has developed away from the 'classic realist' text towards the genuinely discontinuous and interactive ... is the picture book" (p. 131).
- 43 Stephens also argues that "the importance of *verisimilitude* is overstated ... language which evokes 'the real world' ... impl[ies] a one-to-one relationship between objects and their representation, and hence ... masks the processes of textual production of meaning: representation becomes equated with 'truth'" (p. 4).
- 44 "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl", p. 191. Further references will be in the text.

writing" (p. 198), only the "realistic tales ... work[ed] well" (p. 199).<sup>45</sup>

However, the point of my study in Part One was not to argue that this situation should be reversed, that so-called 'classic realist' conventions be replaced with new metafictional ones and that critics/authors choose between either metafiction or realism. While I agree with Hunt, Stephens and Rose that there is a problem with a hang-over of book-centred critical norms, I have a difficulty with their solution to this problem. In reacting against these norms, Hunt in particular is drawn into a relatively simplistic reversal of hierarchies that seeks to exclude the term of the opposition – 'open' versus 'closed', 'writerly' versus 'readerly' and 'metafictional' versus 'classic realist'<sup>46</sup> – that leaves no space for more subtle, comprehensive and critical approaches. Inevitably then, Hunt falls back into the same kind of difficulties of which he is critical of book-centred critics. As discussed, he claims that metafictional texts are closer to the 'culture of childhood' while the book-centred critics claimed *exactly the same status* for 'classic realist' texts. Similarly, Hunt maintains that metafictional texts, by calling attention to their own fabrication, can claim to be language at its most true/most appropriate to children while the book-centred critics maintained that 'classic realist' texts, by (this time) *not* calling attention to their own fabrication, can again claim *exactly the same status*. This is not to say that these terms (open/closed and metafictional/classic realist) are not useful but that placed in opposition to one other they become problematic.<sup>47</sup>

*(c) Maintaining the instability of language and meaning, and variety in different readers' responses to the text, while simultaneously maintaining the metafictional text as a stable, unchanging entity and therefore shutting down the plural nature of readers' responses*

For Hunt, books are either 'closed' or 'open', either 'readerly' (*lisible*) or 'writerly' (*scriptible*), and he limits readers to this model:

[m]any of the confusions over the status and quality of children's books ... stem from the assumption that they must necessarily be what Roland Barthes has called *lisible* rather than *scriptible*. They are 'closed texts' which the skilled reader reads 'below capacity'. In other words, the writer has attempted to do all the work for the reader, to limit the possibilities of interpretation, to heavily guide understanding.

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- 45 In contrast, metafictional texts are characterised by such features as narrative disruptions and intrusions, unresolved endings, wordplay and typographical innovations that call attention to the constructed nature of the text, its fictive status. In talking of his own books, for example, Hunt states "[t]hey are all experimental, designed to confront rather than confirm, expectations" (p. 163).
- 46 "Much of the critical discourse around children's metafiction", as McCallum observes, "has been situated within a theoretical frame which opposes metafiction and realism", "Metafictions and Experimental Works", p. 399.
- 47 In this context, McCallum makes the important observation that "[a]n increasingly noticeable phenomena has been the appropriation of experimental and metafictional narrative techniques into mainstream children's literature, an occurrence which blurs the distinctions between experimental and non-experimental, between the mainstream and the marginal ... experimental and metafictional features become more superficial aspects of a text's construction, and hence more conventionalised and formulaic" (p. 408).

The *scriptible*, or 'writerly', text, on the other hand, is 'open' to much more input by the reader. (p. 81)<sup>48</sup>

In drawing on Barthes' terms, Hunt falls into an overly simplistic 'either-or-ist' stance that Barthes, particularly in *S/Z*, arguably avoids.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Barthes, he shuts down the play of language that occurs for readers of *all* texts ('closed' as well as 'open') – as Barthes' study of Balzac's so-called 'classic realist' text *Sarrasine* underlined – and instead tends to cast the text as a stable, unchanging, timeless entity (always 'closed' or always 'open', these being innate qualities of the text<sup>50</sup>). The 'closed' text, for example, "prescribes" the level at which it "requires to be read" – because it is "very familiar, it is predictable; because it involves little deduction, it can be read easily ... the actual transfer of information (that is, new information) is low" (Hunt, p. 82). Hunt concludes that such a text "neither demands any input from the reader, nor supplies anything other than confirmation of the standard patterns of the fictive world" (p. 83). He therefore closes down the plural nature of reading response. In order to maintain his notion of the 'closed' text, he must also maintain a notion of the 'closed' reader: child readers as always reading in a 'closed' way, as always being constrained by the text.<sup>51</sup> (A 'closed' text, in fact all

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48 See Barthes, "From Work to Text", rpt. in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 73-81, and *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). (Hunt states that Barthes is "one of the few theoreticians" he proposes to mention by name in his book [p. 10].) The idea that texts can be either 'open' or 'closed' were popularised by Eco – see *The Role of the Reader*. For Barthes, the 'writerly' text is characterised by several features: it "goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation" (p. 75); it "practices the infinite deferral of the signified" with emphasis on "the idea of [language] play" ("From Work to Text", p. 76); it is "plural" (p. 76); and it "asks the reader for an active collaboration" (p. 80).

49 Again, this is not to question Hunt's and other critics' important work in looking at how child readers may have been denied more complex texts (agreeing that it is not because of some inherent inability on the part of child readers to cope with metafictional texts that child books have been limited in the past) or to suggest that the metafictional is not a valid direction for child literature but rather to point out that metafictional characteristics become problematic when they are put forward as the *only* direction for child literature to the (attempted) exclusion of other characteristics, and when they are defined in reductive, uncritical ways.

50 In contrast, Barthes talks of the "infinity of texts, of languages, of systems" (*S/Z*, p. 3). The text does not have a unique identity but rather, as Barbara Johnson (although somewhat overstating the case) puts it, the very idea of identity is subverted, "infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole", *The Critical Difference: Essays in Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 4.

51 Again, in contrast, what Barthes describes in *S/Z* is more a way of *reading* texts (reading in a 'readerly' or a 'writerly' way) than a way of categorising the texts themselves (although there is some ambiguity in Barthes' work here): "[w]hy is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (p. 4). Barthes emphasises the reader's role in this process (hence the importance of Barthes' work to later reader-response theory) – all language is open to freeplay including the language of the 'classic realist' text. Of course, the notion of an 'infinite freeplay of signifiers' stance is somewhat overstated. As I have sought to emphasise, the text and the reader both act upon and constrain each other within the broader context of acting upon/being constrained by social practices (see Gadamer). This is not to deny that some textual characteristics/conventions can be said to have dominated in particular texts at particular times and that they do have an impact (just as the characteristics and conventions that have dominated in particular reading practices/critical interpretations at particular times also have an impact) but, as Booth has

texts, are open to many readings<sup>52</sup> – a reader may accept the constraints in the text to a greater or lesser extent – and an 'open' text, in fact all texts, constrain the reader to some extent.)

This notion sits uncomfortably too with Hunt's earlier image of child readers as the "true 'deconstructors' of text, ready to read 'against' texts, to use them as a basis for extravagant readings, free of tiresome constraints of understanding, and hence free to misread" (p. 97), as well as with his major argument that "the culture of primary readers of children's literature is not necessarily ours":

this means that the adult has to accept counter-readings, readings which seem perverse or illogical, as a necessary part of the child interpreting the text (p. 74) ... it is clear that we are dealing ... with a different kind of ability, one that seems likely to view narrative (consequently perceive its structures) in a way not accounted for in conventional theory ... [the text] may be perceived perversely or subversively. (p. 76)

These comments all tend to suggest child readers that are *always* reading in an 'open' way (readers that are not constrained by the text): "[u]nskilled readers must find *all* texts unconventional" (Hunt, p. 132). And, if children always do read openly, as Hunt at least at this point suggests, then why should he worry about the attempts of 'closed' texts to control them? This concept of the child reader in turn appears to contradict other of Hunt's observations:

[i]n peer texts, the adult reader ... can adjust to the degree of control which the author appears to be exercising .... With books 'for children', or 'unskilled' readers, because of the status of the audience, the author-reader (or narrator-narratee) relationship is a more than usually unbalanced power relationship. The audience is created by the writer much more directly than with a peer-text, in the sense that the text does more than display its codes, grammar, and contracts; it suggests what the reader must be or become to optimize the reading of the text ... it *prescribes* what the reader *must* be, and indeed, because there is both an authoritarian and an educational element involved, what the reader *can* be. (p. 84)

Hunt now suggests that child readers have the potential to be manipulated and controlled by textual encoding (and far more so than adult readers), children are "developing readers who do not have the perspectives to make fully informed judgements" (p. 165). He therefore effectively undermines his earlier image of child readers as "ready to read against texts" (as "more flexible in their perceptions of texts", "less bound by fixed

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continually and rightly emphasised, these conventions are not *all* bad and the unconventional is not *all* good. The relationship between reader, text and social practices, particularly in terms of the concept of the 'subject' and the notion of agency, is therefore more complex than Hunt's (reductive and contradictory) treatment suggests. As I will shortly discuss, Stephens' treatment of this area is more comprehensive.

52 By way of illustration, Barthes, for example, turns not to what would be for, Hunt and some other critics, a 'classic open' text (by say Joyce, Sterne or Garner) but to what the same critics would term as a 'classic realist' text, Balzac's *Sarrasine*. As Johnson emphasises, "[a]lthough Balzac's text apparently represents ... the negative, readerly end of the hierarchy, Barthes' treatment of it does seem to illustrate all the characteristics of the positive, writerly end" (p. 6).



schemas" and "more open to genuinely radical thought" [p. 57]), and therefore presumably reading against the controls encoded in the text. Hunt's position is inconsistent here, although both stances finally serve his purpose: that 'the child' is a naturally 'open' reader supports the significance of the 'open' text (and points to a natural affinity between 'the child' and the 'open' text) and that 'the child' is so easily manipulated also supports the importance of the 'open' text ('the child' needs such texts to be liberated for metafictional texts do not oppress child readers into controlled responses).<sup>53</sup> This raises questions about how Hunt might be using the concept of 'the child' to buttress his own argument and position. (This is not to detract, however, from Hunt's point that adults may be teaching children to read in a limited, 'closed' way, an issue that Stephens takes further.<sup>54</sup>) Hunt also falls into a number of difficulties here in terms of the questions his stance on language raises about the status of the reader-subject, and reader identification versus reader agency and resistance.

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Nodelman is particularly critical of this aspect of Hunt's work, observing that much of Hunt's discussion of "ideology" focuses on "the ways in which our culture constructs the subjectivity of its members" but, despite this, Hunt "still insists that children are somehow free, that their selves are somehow not yet constructed, that they are somehow not yet enmeshed in ideology. And obviously, both can't be true".<sup>55</sup> As Nodelman concludes, "if ideology does indeed construct subjectivity", then all children over a few days old, as well as adults, are "already enmeshed in cultural constraints and categories". Children are "already being 'childlike' in ways approved and therefore expected and encouraged by its culture, already being programmed to read as children are expected to read" (pp. 37-38). Hunt does not confront this contradiction.

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53 This points to a certain circularity of argument. Hunt argues that we must have "*some* idea of what children understand" (p. 87) (even though he had earlier argued that 'the child' is of a different culture thus making it more difficult to know what children understand). Being able to have "some idea" of this area in turn enables Hunt to undertake his re-readings of child texts based on reading "from a child's point of view" (p. 198) and, based on the results of these re-readings, lends greater validity to his argument that child readers have a natural affinity with 'open' texts and the potential to be easily manipulated by 'closed' texts.

54 Stephens is highly critical of a strategy for understanding literary texts frequently encouraged by educators, that is, the reader's identification with the main character. Taken together with reading response exercises that purport to value a child reader's supposedly individual response, Stephens suggests that this "is a dangerous ideological tool and pedagogically irresponsible. It fosters an illusion that readers are in control of the text whereas they are highly susceptible to the ideologies of the text, especially the unarticulated or implicit ideologies" (p. 68). Stephens, as well as examining metafictional texts that offer readers a range of subject positions, therefore also encourages the developing of a broader range of reading strategies for children that, while still allowing for identification, achieve some critical distance from characters: "[t]he optimum enabling status for the reader is to have a number of available reading strategies" (pp. 70-71).

55 "The Second Kind of Criticism", p. 37. Further references will be in the text.

This "innocent extra-cultural child" (p. 38), as Nodelman terms it, is of particular interest in terms of my argument that many contemporary critics of child literature have sought to hide behind the concept of a 'liberated child reader'. As I have discussed, such critics have sought to bring children and certain ethical/political values into close relation without making their interests in children apparent or having those values questioned – sanctioned by reference to the 'liberated child reader', these values become naturalised and rendered innocent. Such an image of the child is "clearly a manifestation of Hunt's own ideology" (Nodelman, p. 38). Rather than liberating child readers, I agree with Nodelman that Hunt posits a "simplistic and limited image" of what children are and of how they "fit within the network of the culture" to which they belong (p. 38).

The notion of a self-produced, self-sufficient individual recalls the polarities discussed in Appendix D. On the one hand, the image of the child as a free individual choosing his or her own values (and as being harmed more seriously by an infringement of that freedom) and, on the other hand, the child as enmeshed in cultural constraints and needing to be taught conformity to what are recognised as 'good' values. Booth argues that, for a number of complex reasons, "much modern thought about the 'individual'" has emphasised the "search inward for the core of the real 'me', the authentic self" and, in that search, "one tends to peel off the inauthentic, insincere, alien influences that might deflect the self from its unique, individual destiny" (p. 237). However, as Booth rightly maintains, the "isolated individual self simply does not, cannot exist" (p. 238), but nor does the self that is *only* enmeshed in cultural constraints. Hunt, despite the contradictions within his work, acknowledges something of the complexity of this situation, of being "continually caught between the ideal of freedom ... and the ideal of responsibility towards children" (p. 163).<sup>56</sup>

What I am emphasising here is that a scope of positions exists, and that the relationship between text, reader and social practices, particularly in terms of the concept of the 'subject', is more complex than the 'either-or-ist' statements in Appendix D allow. Stephens' work provides a far more critical and comprehensive discussion of this relationship in that he does not imply that individuals are either implicated in and affected by texts and social practices or somehow separate from and untouched by those texts and practices:

[o]n the one hand, audiences bring prior knowledge and preconceptions about books and the world to a reading, have assumptions about how narratives are shaped and become meaningful, and bring information from other texts to bear on the text under consideration. On the other hand, textual structures such as the representations of direct speech, and especially conversation, have a powerful

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<sup>56</sup> See also Inglis, "[t]o put the opposition briskly, they (adults) want to say 'here are good books; read them, they'll do you good,' at the same time as they say, 'My books aren't necessarily your books: you must ... read what you want to read, and choose it for yourself', *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 9.

influence in implicitly predetermining the significances readers may find (pp. 43-44);

the meaning of a text is best characterised as a dialectic between textual discourse (including its construction of an implied reader and a range of potential subject positions) and a reader's disposition, familiarity with story conventions and experiential knowledge (p. 59);

texts do not exist in a vacuum, but are context-dependent. They are produced within, and to an extent by, particular social formations, and they seek, explicitly or implicitly, to inculcate particular social values and attitudes available at the time of production (p. 69); and

[t]he subject/individual exists within a dialectical relationship with sociality as configured *moments* of interpretation within the social relations which produce the subject and which the subject helps to produce ... The *subject* can signify not only the role of one who acts, but also one who is *subjected* to the authority of the text (p. 80).<sup>57</sup>

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*(d) 'Lumping' together of metafictional texts/'openness' with a more progressive ethics and politics*

Hunt suggests that metafictional texts are more liberating while other fictions are repressive: "to introduce a child to literature in a way that has been defined until now is to narrow, not broaden, his or her life" (Hunt, p. 13). Similarly, Stephens is concerned with the subject positions constructed for the reader by the text, maintaining that "interrogative" fiction offers "freer roles to the reader" (p. 120). In other fiction, "children are encouraged to situate themselves inside the text by identifying with a principal character and its construction and experience of the world", and "a mode of reading which locates the reader only within the text", Stephens concludes, "leaves readers susceptible to gross forms of intellectual manipulation" (p. 4).<sup>58</sup> A metafictional/experimental child book is more progressive in its ethics and politics than texts with a 'realist' content: "[t]o break the ideological deadlock which either tries to use the book as a social weapon ... or strives to keep the book the same, we must experiment" (Hunt, p. 153).

Hunt maintains that metafictional texts avoid the overtly didactic, controlling tendencies of 'classic realist' texts: "[a] controlled narrative decreases the possibilities of interaction and, ultimately prescribes thought" (p. 117). Metafictional literature is therefore rendered ethically and politically neutral. For while, on the one hand, Hunt admits that such

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<sup>57</sup> Compare these statements with Hunt's 'either-or-ist' stance: "humans do not 'produce themselves'. They are produced by society, and in the process are given certain 'modes of subjectivity'" (p. 146).

<sup>58</sup> Stephens adds that "the number of writers who write with such a reading process in mind is in the majority" (p. 4). Drawing on Rose, he suggests that this is "a defence against what they perceive as the cultural threat of [post]modernism" (p. 5). As I will discuss, however, Rose does not share Stephens' and Hunt's optimism about the liberating potential of metafictional texts.

literature cannot be "apolitical"<sup>59</sup> and acknowledges that he is "revealing something of [his] own ideology" in maintaining that child books should be "genuinely mind-expanding" (p. 154), he implies, on the other hand, that metafictional literature *is* in fact 'apolitical'. As his comment above illustrates, for example, he implies that metafictional texts should not be used as a "social weapon" but such texts are privileged by Hunt because he believes that they do not oppress child readers. Hence the metafictional text *is* for Hunt effectively a "social weapon", a weapon against oppression. The impression created by Hunt is that child literature can, by a conscious reduction in the controls still acknowledged to be placed on such texts by adults, approach closer to a literature *for* the child. The metafictional text is benign because it seeks to liberate the child reader.<sup>60</sup>

In this way, Hunt has obscured the fact that a concern with what is 'good for' the child is still present in his discourse, contrary to his statements: "instead of saying 'better/worse', or 'suitable/unsuitable', criticism would be more profitably employed in saying 'This text has certain potentials for interaction, certain possibilities of meaning'. If nothing else, we would escape from the present confusion of 'good' with 'good for'" (p. 83).

Presumably, for Hunt a 'good' text has *more* potential for reader interaction and *more* possibilities of meaning (consistent with his preference for metafictional texts) but, as he continually emphasises, these characteristics also work to liberate the child reader. Hence, such texts are also 'good for'; they serve an ethical/political purpose. As I have discussed, this is not to suggest that ethical/political critique is a problem (although I have difficulties, as I will later comment, with the notion of a 'liberated child reader'), as to highlight that this issue – the issue of ethics/politics – is being denied or avoided (neutralised) by Hunt rather than discussed (a trend I have commented on throughout this thesis). No text (whether so-called metafictional or 'classic realist') is without ethical/political implications.

Unlike Hunt, both McCallum and Stephens are more explicit about their ethical/political position and engage in (meta-)ethical discourse. (Stephens' ethical/political critique also acknowledges the complexities, as discussed earlier, of the relationship between reader, text and social practices.) McCallum openly talks of the "instructive potential of metafiction": "[b]y involving readers in the production of textual meanings, metafiction can implicitly teach literary and cultural codes and conventions, as well as specific interpretive strategies, and hence empower readers to read more competently".<sup>61</sup> And Stephens states, "readers will re-construct their 'own' subject position in dialogue with

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59 Hunt states that he is critical of the notion that "children's books, like children, are innocent, and that the motives of writers and critics and parents and the rest of us are ideologically neutral. As a result, we fail to see ... that we cannot be apolitical" (p. 142).

60 Hunt is blind here to what has been called 'the ideology of ideology', to other discourses laying claim to having unmasked that which was hidden while presenting themselves as neutral.

61 "Metafiction and Experimental Work", p. 398.

the text; I think myself it is the best and most humane subject position available to us as human beings. I also recognise that in reaching it readers are thoroughly subjected to the text's processes" (p. 287).<sup>62</sup>

*'Ideology' (ethics and politics) and child literature*

This linking of 'open' texts with a progressive ethics and politics is interesting in terms of the broader concern in contemporary child literature with 'ideology'<sup>63</sup> – or rather ethics and politics – and child literature. The title of Stephens' recent study, for example, is *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*.<sup>64</sup>

That the same book read by different readers results in different readings of that book complicates what can be said of the ethics and politics of the relationship between that book and those readers.<sup>65</sup> As I have suggested, the complexities of the relationship

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62 In privileging metafictional texts and maintaining that those texts work to liberate child readers, it is interesting to briefly consider what set of ethical/political values are being privileged by Hunt and Stephens in these texts, and what set of ethical/political values in 'classic realist' texts are being discarded. In terms of the latter texts, Stephens is critical of their "colonialis[m]" (p. 24), "traditional ideas of mother-son bonding" (p. 63), "moral didacticism" (p. 127) and the constitution of "woman as sex object" (p. 143). In terms of the metafictional texts, Stephens acclaims their "strong recuperation of Black social history" (p. 52), "multiculturalism" (p. 53), reworking of the forms of "family organisation" that no longer structure "late twentieth century society" (p. 63), use of "taboo language" (p. 122), "dymystif[ication of] sex" (p. 143), "interrogat[ion of] masculinity" (p. 144) and "penetrating analysis of how women are situated within a male social practice" (p. 262). The point is that while many of these characteristics are widely considered 'goods'; they are not neutral goods which stand without further elaboration.

63 As discussed in previous chapters, there are immediate difficulties with the term 'ideology'. Several definitions of the concept are in use. These include the reproduction of unequal relations (gender, race, age role) as natural or normal; the "inscriptions of social power in language"; "any set of opinions, beliefs, attitudes"; and "the more or less unconscious medium of habitual behaviour", *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Payne, p. 252. The last two definitions of the term 'ideology' are the most frequently employed. Sarland, for example, defines 'ideology' as "refer[ring] to all espousal, assumption, consideration, and discussion of social and cultural values", "Ideology", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, p. 41. This usage of the term has in turn called into question the other usages of the term, for "the ubiquity of ideology, rendering it coterminous with culture, pose[s] the problem of how it could be known, let alone transformed", *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Payne, p. 256. I will not be using the term 'ideology' in this study preferring to refer instead to issues of ethics and politics.

64 See also Hunt's "Politics, Ideology, and Children's Literature", *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, pp. 138-154. Other studies in this area include Leeson's *Reading and Righting: The Past, Present and Future of Fiction for the Young* (London: Collins, 1985), Inglis' *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction* and Hollindale's "Ideology and the Children's Book", rpt. in *Literature for Children*, ed. Hunt, pp. 19-40. Hunt's and Rose's interest in the political and economic circumstances of the production of texts is also of interest - see Hunt's "Producing Children's Literature" (pp. 155-174) and Rose's "Peter Pan and Commercialisation of the Child" (pp. 87-114).

65 In the past, some studies on ethics/politics of texts and reading have implied that authors of child literature should conform to a predetermined ethics and politics, and/or assumed the relationship between reader and text to be one of simple identification (that books with a positive characterisation of women, for example, will automatically change reader attitudes). "Ideology", however, as Hollindale rightly observes, "is not something which is transferred to children as if

between the reader, text and social practices demand a comprehensive form of ethical/political critique that, like Stephens' approach, acknowledges and engages with these complexities – with the tension, as Sarland observes, between "determinism and agency":

[o]ne view of fiction is that it constructs readers in specific ideological formations, and thus enculturates them into the dominant discourse of capitalism - class division, paternalism, racism. Such views are not totally fatalistic, but do require of readers a very conscious effort to read against texts, to deconstruct them in order to reveal their underlying ideology ... The opposing view is that readers are not nearly such victims of fiction as has been assumed.<sup>66</sup>

Frequently, as I have discussed, children are perceived as either being strongly influenced (and more so than adults) by questionable ethical/political values or as being strongly immune to/innocent of (and more so than adults) questionable ethical/political values (and sometimes, as in the case of Hunt, as somehow alternating between these two positions). As Rose observes, 'the child' is being used in this way to obfuscate the "divisions" (class, age-role, race, history<sup>67</sup>, gender) and "difficulties" (language, violence, sexuality) "of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10).

#### *Narrative theory and empirical studies of children's experiences of texts*

As discussed in Chapter 4, Hunt's primary concern is with how children might read the text, based on an examination of how adults read the text: "[w]e need to see what happens when we read, and at each stage qualify what is happening with what may be happening with a child" (p. 3). This is also Chambers' approach: "the first question I ask is *not*, 'Will children like this book?' The first question, it seems to me, should be, 'What happens to me as I read this book?'"<sup>68</sup> Hunt draws upon aspects of narrative theory to consider how child readers' encounters with the text might differ from that of skilled adult

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they were empty receptacles. It is something which they already possess, having drawn it from a mass of experiences far more powerful than literature", "Ideology and Children's Books", p. 35.

66 "Ideology", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, p. 54.

67 Of interest here, for example, is Hunt's claim that historical child books are no longer *for* children; they are no longer 'genuine children's books'. He suggests that most of us would regard as "legitimate children's books" only those that are "contemporary": "concepts of childhood change so rapidly that there is a sense in which books no longer applicable to childhood must fall into a limbo ... since they are of no interest to the current librarian or child" (p. 61). He concludes that historical child books need to be placed in a "separate category" (p. 62) and that "we should divide the study of children's literature between those books that were once for children ... in a childhood culture that is no longer accessible or relevant to us, and those that are still bought and read as children's books ... it would mean that children's literature as we know it today dates from the 1920s" (p. 200). Hunt seeks to rope-off a 'genuine children's literature' but in doing so makes the genre a much poorer one and resorts to lumping generalisations of questionable logic. Why, for example, should "historical children's books" be of "no interest" to contemporary children? This is also to overlook Gadamer's point that our understanding (that of adults *and* children) is always historically shaped and immersed in history, and hence the notion of a contemporary reader as (re-)creating historical texts (as being in dialogue with such texts).

68 *Booktalk*, p. 31.

readers: "[i]f we examine the way in which a 'skilled' reader reads – how *we* as adults make meaning – we may be able to see what a developing reader lacks (p. 90) ... I would like to start by asking what would happen if we took away those things that we know because we are skilled readers" (p. 95). Hunt identifies five skills needed to read texts<sup>69</sup> and also briefly considers issues concerning register and narrative stance. It is here that I want to turn to Stephens, as this area is the focus of his study.

Stephens is concerned that the subject positions available to children readers in child books are often "restricted and restrictive" (p. 50). He is particularly concerned with texts where there is first person narration by the main character, and/or third person narration of events focalised by the main character, because readers tend to align themselves with the focalising character's point of view and ethics/politics, and to internalise the perceptions and attitudes of this focaliser: "[t]he impulse of readers to surrender themselves to the shaping discourse renders them susceptible to the power in point of view to impose a subject position from which readers will read" (p. 27). Stephens is also concerned with effaced and omniscient narration as both have the potential to "covertly attract reader identification" (p. 22) through implying that certain assumptions, objectives and outcomes of the story are natural and desirable, and in telling the audience how to react.

Texts with these characteristics are found by Stephens to be repressive and manipulative. They frequently appear to encourage a sense of individuality (valuing individuality and choice over social conformity): "[i]n both society and literature it appears that the individual strives for autonomous self-hood, and it is usual for narratives in children's literature to represent this striving as having a positive outcome" (p. 57). However, such texts in fact encourage conformity to a limiting/conventional definition of what it means to be an individual by offering readers only a narrow scope of ways to be individual (ways that fit in with the author's values). Such texts manipulate child readers into adopting socially acceptable ideas about themselves by offering specific (and limited) points of view/subject positions from which fictional events are perceived and then encouraging readers to adopt these points of view/subject positions.

Stephens, like Hunt, supports skilled empirical work with child readers and, importantly, he also undertakes such work. Two books, *The Selkie Girl* (1986) by Susan Cooper and Warwick Hutton, and *The Seal Mother* (1986) by Mordicai Gerstein, were read to one hundred and seventy four children (aged between 10-14) at three Sydney schools to

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<sup>69</sup> These are mechanical skills (ease of reading), acquired knowledge/competence (life experience), connotations (personal meanings), literary and cultural allusions, and allusions to how texts work (text experience). He also looks at assumptions about the child reader implied in the "peri-text" (p. 4), the peripheral features of the text such as the cover and title pages, chapter titles, publisher's commentary, layout and illustrations, for example.

gauge their reactions to these texts.<sup>70</sup> This work underlined the complexity of the relationship between the reader-subject, text and social practices:

[r]eaders not only arrived at the same 'story' from each book but also inferred a common 'significance' ... Eleven-year-olds were as capable of inferring this as were thirteen-year-olds. The books' socializing objectives, however, were met with both full complicity and quite violent rejection, so even if (real) audiences were prepared to adopt the subject position of the implied reader it was not the inevitable outcome that they also adopted the ideological frame implicit in that position. It also seemed to be the case that readers could refuse that subject position and still actively engage with the texts, apparently constructing a subject position from within their everyday social practice in order to oppose the position implied by the text. (p. 64)

While Stephens acknowledges that the study of reading response is a "difficult area" and that its findings "must be regarded as conditional" (p. 58), he does not go to the other extreme, taken by Rose, that such studies should therefore be avoided/excluded.

Stephens favours metafictional texts that offer readers a choice of subject positions and use different strategies to achieve critical distance from the main character (such as "metafictional playfulness, shifts in focalizer" and "intertextual allusiveness" [p. 70]).<sup>71</sup> Intertextual texts are particularly highly regarded, "[i]ntertextuality ... has the effect of drawing readers' attention to the reading process itself" (p. 116) and, "by evoking multiple perspectives" and building in "'distancing' strategies" that enable the reading self "to operate in dialogue both with points of view articulated within the discourse and with social practices, it encourages "critical reading" (p. 117).<sup>72</sup> Interrogative texts are perceived to be even better, offering "freer roles to the reader" (p. 120) through such strategies as offering characters "time out" from the constraints of society, the inversion of dominant hierarchies, and the subversion of authority and traditional literary genres (p. 121).<sup>73</sup>

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70 Stephens states that these "reading sessions were structured to promote comment about particular story events and components which we had previously identified as significant foci but their procedure was also open enough to provide frequent opportunities for the children to express their spontaneous thoughts and reactions. The children were finally invited to offer some written responses and asked to 'rewrite the story' they had heard" (p. 60). These rewritings (in terms of the changes, emphases and additions made by the children) indicated the children's "degree of engagement with the text, the aspects of narrative that aroused their interest or concern, [and] their values and attitudes relevant to those textual components", as well as any "gender" issues (p. 61).

71 He suggests that even if some readers resist the multiple subject positions offered by such texts and construct a subject position that is more socially conservative at least these readers have been encouraged to "contemplate the possibility" of a more critical reading (p. 64).

72 Jo-Ann Wallace also discusses the possibilities for agency and resistance for the child subject through multiple subject positions, pointing out that "within Western modernity, children have fewer subject positions available to them – they are not, for example, 'allowed' to work, to have sexual relations, to withhold their labour at school", "Technologies of 'the Child': Towards a Theory of the Child-Subject", *Textual Practice*, 9, no. 2 (1995), p. 295.

73 Such texts, Stephens suggests, create "roles for child characters which interrogate the normal subject positions created for children within socially dominant ideological frames" (p. 120). He concludes that the "most notable effect of these strategies is to discourage unquestioning empathy or identification with the main characters as subjects and to situate the reader as a separately constructed subject firmly outside of the text" (p. 156).



**What images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its critical discourse are privileged by Chambers, Wall, Hunt and Stephens? What assumptions might lie behind these privileged images and characteristics?**

By way of concluding my first question, the discussion here and in Chapter 4 has considered what images of the child and characteristics of child literature and its discourse are privileged by contemporary critics (by Hunt, Stephens, Wall and Chambers). I will not go over my conclusions to this question in detail (my summaries in Chapters 3 and 4 serve that purpose). Briefly, these critics tend to privilege all or most of the following: metafictional texts; play with language; progressive ethical and political values (metafictional texts are more ethical and politically progressive); a child literature that is more liberating (neutral?) in its exploration of issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity and particularly age-role; an independent, innocent child who is free of cultural constraints and has a strong self-presence/self-coherence; a child enmeshed in cultural (textual) constraints who has a fragile mastery of identity; the possibility of having some idea of the reality of children and their experiences of texts; and a generalised/idealised concept of 'the child' (smoothing over differences between children and shoring up the notion of 'the child's' progression to adult maturity).

To conclude the discussion on my second question – on what might be adult critics' investment in these privileged images and characteristics? – I would argue that, in seeking to address the concerns raised by Rose regarding adults' investment in the child book so as to arrive at a 'children's literature' that is more *for* children, these critics (particularly Hunt) have tended to reverse a series of hierarchies: 'metafictional' ('open') texts that call attention to the 'constructed nature of language' and situate the reader outside of the text are privileged over 'classic realist' ('closed') texts that 'deny the constructed nature of language' and secure the reader to their intent; a demand for language play is privileged over a desire for stability of language; a desire for certain ethically and politically progressive values is privileged over a desire for what are perceived to be more 'conservative' (less progressive) values; a demand that child literature be more liberating (neutral?) in its exploration of issues of gender, race and so on is privileged over a demand that child literature avoid such issues; an independent, innocent child who is free of cultural constraints is privileged over a child who needs to be taught conformity to what are recognised as 'good' values; a child reader enmeshed in cultural (textual) constraints is privileged over a child reader who is innocent and free of cultural constraints; and the possibility of knowing something of the reality of children and their experiences of texts is privileged over the view that it is impossible to have any idea of these areas and that standpoint/empirical approaches should be rejected/excluded.

As with all of the polarities I have discussed in this thesis (and while I agree with Hunt and Stephens that there is a problem with the persistence of certain book-centred critical norms), when they are taken to their opposite extremes the terms of these oppositions break down and cannot be sustained: "radical gestures of opposition and negation are complicit with, and parasitic upon, what they are presumably rejecting" (Bernstein, p. 308). Again, as Taylor has remarked, such positions obscure all the interesting insights which lie in the space between them.<sup>74</sup>

If, as Rose suggests, 'traditional' ('classic realist') child literature and 'traditional' (book-centred) critical discourse reveal a desire to use child literature, critical discourse on that literature and an image of the generalised/idealised child reader to preserve certain values (ethical, political, aesthetic) under threat in modern society, escape from the "historical divisions" (class, gender, race, age-role) and "difficulties" (language, sexuality, violence) of which "children no less than ourselves, form a part" (p. 10), hold off a threat to the assumption that "language is something which can simply be organised and cohered" (p. 10), and suspend questions about how our identities are implicated in language, sexual difference and the reworking of our memories of ourselves as children, then contemporary child literature and contemporary critical discourse on that literature might be used to *similar* ends. We therefore need to question the assumption that metafictional literature and its discourse is automatically aligned with opposite, more liberating, ends. If the values inherent in this contemporary ('postmodernist'?) aesthetic can be allied with the image of 'the child' (in the way book-centred critics allied a 'classic realist' aesthetic with 'the child'), there is a sense in which these values might be seen as part of our origins, as our 'original', 'true' values.

As I have discussed, a number of critics, particularly Hunt, have fallen into problems when seeking to ground a finally stable definition of 'the child'.<sup>75</sup> Hunt also implies that metafictional texts, texts that engage in language play, can "claim to be language at its most true" (Rose, p. 140) and therefore at its most appropriate to children for whom "play is a natural part of their outlook" (Hunt, p. 57). He implies that there is some natural/necessary link between the child and 'postmodernist' language. This is certainly evidence in such critics' work of a desire to shore up certain values (ethical, political, aesthetic) that are perceived by these critics to be undervalued in society. The notion of an independent, innocent child who is free of cultural constraints is also evidence of a desire to escape from some of the "historical divisions" (such as class and gender) and "difficulties" (such as sexuality and violence) in our society. Further, even when these

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<sup>74</sup> *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Although, at the same time, these critics have at least entered into/engaged with the highly complex area of the reality of children and their experiences of texts – areas that Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein have closed off from discussion – and in doing so have opened up a number of important new perspectives on this area.

divisions and difficulties are actively highlighted (as they are in many metafictional texts), often these progressive issues/values are not open to the same scrutiny as the perceived 'repressive' values of 'classic realist' texts. The critic is therefore able to bring child readers and these 'progressive' values into close proximity without their interests in these readers and in these values being made fully apparent. Sanctioned by reference to the 'liberated child reader', these values in turn become naturalised and rendered innocent. While acknowledging that language is not something that can simply be organised and cohered, such critics still perceive the metafictional text as securing readers to its intent, hence suggesting some ambivalence/contradiction on the part of these critics about the nature of language. Finally, as I discussed with reference to Hunt's work, there is ambiguity over 'the child' being either free of or enmeshed in cultural constraints, with 'the child' being used to hold off questions about how our identities are implicated in language, social practice, history, sexual difference and so on.

As this discussion suggests, and without wishing to be too schematic here, there are clearly problems with a simple reversal of oppositional hierarchies. And yet, while Hunt, Stephens and other critics often do fall into these positions and these investments, this process is not as inevitable as Rose suggests. Rose rejects the possibility of having knowledge about the reality of children and their experiences of texts (and rejects/excludes approaches that consider this area)<sup>76</sup>, and she suggests that, even if child fiction and commentators on that fiction embraced what she terms as "'modernist' experimentation", they would still slip back into old ways ("whenever the possibility of a different language for children is mooted it slides back into the return of the same" [p. 140]). As I will discuss, Rose does not therefore allow for the range of positions that fall between her stance and the 'classic realist' and metafictional ("modernist") stances she rejects.

In concluding my discussion on these two questions, it is my argument that in their discourse on child literature, contemporary critics have tended to obscure their interests in 'the child' by hiding behind the concept of the 'liberated child reader': "[u]ntil we have an attitude of mind (and criticism) which not only wishes to expand and liberate the child reader but also attempts to understand that this cannot be done by the mixture-as-before, we will not really have children's fiction at all: only adultist writing, and adultist writing-about".<sup>77</sup> There are two major difficulties with this notion of 'liberation' (as discussed, this is not to question the validity of an ethics/politics of child literature, the practice of ethical/political critique or the idea of liberation per se). First, the individual (the child) can never be *fully* liberated and the text can never be *fully* liberating. There can be no fully independent, innocent individual and no completely neutral/benign text – both are

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<sup>76</sup> Although, as I will shortly discuss, there are some contradictions in her own work on this point.

<sup>77</sup> Hunt, "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", p. 185.

enmeshed in cultural constraints. And second, there is the related question of how children are being liberated.

The impression created by Hunt and Stephens (although Stephens is more careful with his terms), as well as by Wall and Chambers, is that child literature can, by a conscious reduction in the controls acknowledged by them to be placed on the text by adults<sup>78</sup>, approach closer to a literature *for* the child: the metafictional text is benign because it seeks to *liberate* the child reader. "[M]uch of the most *liberating* work", Hunt observes, "may well lie in the books of John Burningham (for example, *Granpa*), Janet and Allan Ahlberg (*The Jolly Postman*), [and] Raymond Briggs (*Fungus the Bogeyman*)" (p. 154). He concludes "Burningham moves closer ... towards what might be called a true children's book in *Granpa*" (pp. 194-195). Then, to reinforce this observation, Hunt must align child readers and metafictional texts closer together: "its very complexity, together with the relinquishing of any authorial control in the verbal text, makes Burningham's *Granpa* closer to the comprehension patterns of an orally based reader than the vast majority of texts that set out to be 'for children'" (p. 195). Hunt's childist fiction privileges metafictional elements and 'openness' but, while it may serve to expose some of the controls adults place on the child and focus attention on the way the image of the child is constructed in child fiction (to be 'liberating' to *some* extent), it cannot be said to be fiction *of* the child. For Hunt, metafictional child literature equals ethically/politically progressive child literature equals literature *of* the child equals ethically/politically neutral child literature. These assumptions, however, raise many questions.

Stephens, as I have suggested, is more careful with his terms. He maintains that the best child book is one which is "interrogative", where "readers will (re-)construct their 'own' subject position in dialogue with the text". He concludes, "I think myself it is the best and most humane subject position available to us as human beings; I also recognise that in reaching it readers are thoroughly subjected to the text's processes" (p. 287). Stephens' position here is significant. He engages with the complexities of this issue and points to ways in which texts of child literature can be more liberating without suggesting that they can ever be completely liberating. And yet Rose's observation that the "best book for children is ... the book which does the child most good, that is, the book which secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effects" (p. 2) remains a highly relevant critique of Stephens' position. While I agree with Nodelman that Stephens arrives at an important position here (such positioning of children is not a process that can be stopped and serves a function that we need to open up for question and better understand), there are still difficulties with his position in terms of the comparative lack of

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<sup>78</sup> Hunt states, "with children's books, we cannot escape the fact that they are written by adults; that there is going to be control, and that it is going to involve moral decisions" (p. 51) and Stephens, "children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience" (p. 8).

scrutiny (compared to that of 'classic realist' texts) of the 'liberating' values of metafictional texts (often the assumption is that these values will be universally perceived to be liberating).

Adult 'control' is an inherent feature of child fiction. Like Rose, Stephens views this control as taking a manipulative/malign form in 'classic realist' child fiction through the reinforcement of conservative/repressive norms and the suppression of metafictional techniques but, unlike Rose, he believes that these controls can take a more liberating form to result in a fiction that is more *for* the child, fiction that is *of* the child. While he therefore opens up space through his dialogic approach for the discussion of issues (about the subject and politics/ethics, for example) that Rose arguably shuts down, he still maintains the problematical notion of 'children's literature'. Hunt and Stephens, along with many other child literature critics, are centrally concerned with the question 'can we arrive at a literature that is more *for* children?'.

For such critics, to claim that 'children's literature' is not *for* children, that it is "impossible", as Rose suggests, is to leave open the possibility that it might be made so. Whatever text is seen to liberate child readers, whether because of its 'play with language' or 'progressive ethics/politics', is regarded as being *for* children with little discussion concerning how critics might know this or what assumptions might lie behind these notions. For Rose, this is a further manipulation of children.

### **Reintroducing a critical discourse**

In tinkering with some of the concerns about child literature and its discourse raised by Rose in an attempt to move towards a child literature that is more *for* children, I would argue that a number of contemporary critics have neglected, dismissed or misappropriated a major aspect of Rose's approach.

Rose makes the fundamental point that 'children's literature' is "impossible" in that any attempt to move towards a more liberating 'children's fiction' – a fiction that is more *for* children – will never arrive at this final ideal destination. There are also too many questions concerning the reality of children and their experiences of texts (no complete knowledge is possible and there is no 'child-in-general') to arrive at a 'genuine children's fiction', a fiction that is more *for children*. 'Children's literature' is therefore not for children in any easy, unproblematic and unambiguous way. Rose's argument for the "impossibility of children's fiction" is not to suggest that it should be written or that it will be written in the future but that it *cannot* be written (except as redefined as fiction written *by* children). As I will discuss, however, I do not want to reject the notion of this genre as absolutely as Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein – hence the concept of 'child literature' I have been proposing in this thesis.

Rose's position has therefore not been fully engaged with by later critics. While many critics have agreed with Rose that adults' investment in the text and in the child are important areas of investigation, they have frequently fallen into a series of traps warned about by Rose, as I have discussed. I now want to turn to Rose's and Lesnik-Oberstein's work by way of concluding this chapter, to point to the need for a *reintroduction* of a critical approach to child literature that takes Rose's approach as its starting point. However, I also want to address a number of limitations I believe to be evident in her approach. (I will defer my conclusions on the three remaining questions from my Introduction until I have discussed these approaches.)

### **Overview of Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction***

Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* is a landmark in critical theory on child fiction, offering a significantly different way of reading such fiction: "[i]nstead of asking what children want, or need, from literature, this book has asked what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child" (p. 137). By posing the question in this form, Rose sets out to foreground some of the "complex meanings concealed inside an expression like 'literature for children' whose very clarity and self-evidence ... seems to work like a decoy or a foil" (p. 137).

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* is used as a case study throughout Rose's work to reinforce her argument that there is no such thing as a 'children's book': "*Peter Pan* stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims – that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, [and] addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book" (p. 1). Rose argues that 'children's fiction' is of far greater significance to adults than to children: "[c]hildren's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) ... [it] sets up the child as an outsider to its own processes, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*". "None of this", she continues, "appears explicitly inside the book itself, which works precisely to the extent that any question of who is talking to whom, and why, is totally erased" (pp. 1-2). The image of the child in the book is therefore used, like bait on a hook, to attract and secure the child outside the book:

[t]here is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes. These purposes are often perverse and mostly dishonest, not wilfully, but of necessity, given that speaking to the child must touch on all of these difficulties [of language and sexuality], none of which it dares to speak. (p. 10)

Nodelman, in a critique of Rose's study, states his support for this much of Rose's argument: "I think Rose is right", each child book "reveals its author's assumptions about

childhood. Rose is also right to insist on the limitations of those assumptions, and to demand our acknowledgement of them".<sup>79</sup> Hunt also supports Rose on this point.<sup>80</sup>

Rose's critical approach to child fiction opens up many important areas of analysis (although her approach also raises a number of questions). I have already touched upon many of Rose's arguments in previous chapters and it is not therefore my intention to go over this ground in detail. The conclusions in those chapters have already gone some way towards confirming the cogency of Rose's arguments concerning the dominance of certain book-centred critical norms. Nodelman agrees that Rose has "a good case to make about the inadequacies of much discussion of children's literature" (p. 99).

Rose's major conclusions focus principally on the construction of 'the child' and the nature of language. Appendix E provides a brief overview of these conclusions (although it omits much of her detailed and insightful textual study of *Peter Pan* made in support of her claims). This overview is important not only because I believe that her work offers a significantly different perspective on child fiction that has often been ignored/misappropriated but also because of the complex nature of her study.

### Critique of Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein

While arguing for a reintroduction of Rose's approach, I also want to discuss a number of difficulties I have with her approach. I also want to briefly discuss Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*<sup>81</sup> which was influenced by Rose. (While I am discussing these two critics together, there are important differences between their studies and I have many more difficulties with Lesnik-Oberstein's approach.)

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79 Nodelman, "The Case of Children's Fiction: or The Impossibility of Jacqueline Rose", p. 98. (Further references will be in the text.) Nodelman has strong reservations about other aspects of Rose's study.

80 "Fiction does not simply entertain: it influences and educates ... books can inculcate not just norms of society, but total ways of looking at the world ... It is important to realise that these implications are not 'natural'; they are what society allows and dictates. The result may be a benevolent image of childhood ... or, as Jacqueline Rose suggests, there may be subtle (and sinister) sexual and ideological fears lurking behind what we try to make of the child ... Dr Rose has a point. Certain assumptions about children – their capacities, their likes, their abilities – are enshrined in these books: the dominant ideology is secure", "Questions of Method and Methods of Questioning: Childist Criticism in Action", pp. 183-184. Zipes is also supportive of this aspect of Rose's argument, see "Taking Political Stock: New Theoretical and Critical Approaches to Anglo-American Children's Literature in the 1980s", *Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1990), pp. 7-22.

81 For a detailed overview of Lesnik-Oberstein's study, see Meek, "The Constructedness of Children", *Signal: Approaches to Children's Literature*, 76 (1995), pp. 5-19.

Rose takes a somewhat reductive stance on the notion of a 'classic realist' aesthetic, as discussed in Chapter 1 and, while importantly rejecting a simplistic reversal of hierarchies whereby a metafictional aesthetic is privileged in its place, she implies that the author/critic is locked into one or other of these two (finally unsustainable) extremes, thus ignoring the scope of positions that lie in between them.

Rose argues that a set of barriers have been constructed that "assign the limits to how far children's literature is allowed to go in upsetting a specific register of representation – one which may well be the most coherent, but which is historically delimited and formally constrained" (p. 139). "Modernism", Rose concludes:

has been assimilated into popular consciousness very unevenly in relation to the different art forms. I would place children's fiction ... at the bottom of the list as far as this acceptability is concerned. The resistance to modernism in children's writing, however, requires an explanation which goes beyond questions of facility of reading and ease (the idea that modernist writing is too difficult or disturbing for children who *need* the regulation of narrative form. (p. 142)

There is considerable critical support for Rose's view, as I have discussed, from a number of critics, including Crago, Stephens and Hunt. A preference for a 'modernist' – or rather postmodernist/metafictional child fiction – has emerged as a major theme in many recent critical commentaries. Her comments, taken together with her critique of the dominance of a 'classic realist' aesthetic, would appear to call for a child fiction that breaks new ground, a fiction that is metafictional.

However, despite this apparent preference, Rose (unlike a number of other critics) qualifies her views here. She argues that child texts that attempt to employ metafictional techniques, and child literature critics that support such techniques, often seek to conflate 'the child' and '(post)modernist experimentation', to imply that "childhood and [post]modernism have some *necessary* relation" (p. 142). This, Rose emphasises, "is simply to underline the availability of 'the child' as a concept to buttress different arguments and positions in the establishment of our relationship to changing cultural forms" (p. 142). By calling attention to their own fabrication, for example, such texts "claim to be language at its most true" (p. 140) and therefore most appropriate to children. Despite their metafictional nature, she concludes that these texts continue to perpetuate questionable norms. Hence, her conclusion that "whenever the possibility of a different language for the child is mooted it slides back into the return of the same" (p. 140). Rose raises a range of important issues here about any simplistic reversal in the privileging of 'classic realist' and metafictional child texts, and points to a number of questionable assumptions concerning the construction of 'the child', the nature of language and



ethics/politics. However, as I have suggested, she herself falls into a number of difficulties.

### *Knowledge of 'the child'/children*

Rose's study offers an important insight into child fiction and its associated critical commentary because of the way it focuses on making visible what adults might desire from the text and from 'the child' through the text. As she demonstrates, too often attention is deflected away from what adults desire and back on to what 'the child' *needs*. Further, it is frequently a generalised image of 'the child' rather than actual children who are at the centre of this focus: "children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. It is an idea whose innocent generality covers up a multitude of sins" (p. 1).<sup>82</sup> As Rose has emphasised, "divisions of class, culture and literacy ... undermine any generalised concept of the child". Child literature cannot address *all* children because "if we are talking to one group of children, then the chances are that we will not be speaking to another" (p. 7). I have discussed the issue of the construction of 'the child' at length in this thesis, and agree with Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein that there are problems with the concept of a knowable, unified child (there are also similar problems in generalising about 'the adult'). However, Rose also appears to question whether it is possible to know something about the reality of *children*: "*Peter Pan* stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims – that it ... addresses [children] as a group which is knowable" (p. 1).

Rose implies that "children's literature is impossible" not just because of the investment that adults have in the book and in 'the child' through the book but also because of the many questions concerning our knowledge of the reality of children. To suggest that we can move towards a 'children's literature' that is more for *children* is founded upon the notion that we can have such knowledge. Contrary to Rose and more particularly Lesnik-Oberstein, I maintain (consistent with my discussion in Chapter 5) that we can say something about the realities of children's lives. However, I agree with Rose that we cannot ignore the point that what we say will be complicated by epistemological issues and concerns of class, race, gender, age role, history, ethnicity and so on. For this reason, I agree with Rose that "children's fiction is impossible". There are too many questions concerning our knowledge of the reality of children to suggest that there can be a 'genuine children's fiction', a fiction that is *of children*. Hence, while I question the notion of child (like the notion of woman) as *a* knowable reality but maintain the notion of children and the need to engage with analyses of children's lives and experiences, I accept that these analyses are also contested – that these are also 'children'. However, this is no

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82 Similarly, Wallace observes that 'the child' is "everywhere in representation" but "almost nowhere in public *self* representation", 'the child' is "nothing more than the site of the adult's representation and discursive address" (pp. 293-294).

reason to dismiss this area altogether. Rose's argument (that it is impossible to have some generalised notion of the reality of 'the child') clearly has cogency in respect to some of the child literature criticism discussed in previous chapters but it is reductionist of more recent approaches (such as by Stephens, as well as some of the approaches of standpoint and empiricist critics) that have broadened the discussion from the notion of 'the child-in-general' and sought to include and engage with analyses of children in terms of their lives and experiences.

There are also some contradictions in Rose's apparent dismissal of this area. If we cannot speak about "children as a group which is knowable" or about a knowable unified child, then what can we make of her statement that the actual sexuality of children is "bisexual, polymorphous, perverse" (p. 4). How does Rose 'know' this? While there may be some ambiguity in Rose's position (resistance against being drawn into an 'either-or-ist' position) on whether or not it is possible to have knowledge of the reality of children (their lives and experiences), there is no such ambiguity about Lesnik-Oberstein's position:

[b]ecause it is assumed that children can be understood, or known, the problems that adult literature criticism engages with seem simplified ... children's literature criticism uses the idea that adults know how children think and feel to 'solve' the problems that adult literary criticism struggles with precisely because it is not sure it is easy for people to know or understand how another person thinks or feels (pp. 5-6);

all children's literature criticism is grounded in this belief – that children exist and can be known (p. 9); and

all 'children' are constructions and inventions (p. 168).

This raises several concerns. While Lesnik-Oberstein's critique of 'children's literature criticism', and particularly of the construction of 'the child' and children, is important (my comments have tended to focus more on aspects of her work that merit questioning), this does not mean that she has to deny analyses of the lives and experiences of children.

One of Lesnik-Oberstein's major complaints about 'children's literature criticism' and particularly standpoint/empiricist work on children's lives and experiences, is that it "continue[s] to assume many different and often contradictory 'children'"<sup>83</sup> and, similarly, that "[c]hildren's literary criticism has failed us by making claims about the effects of reading on children on which it cannot agree within itself" (p. 182). In this way, she appears to push such critics into having to assume a universal, stable notion of children. She suggests that analyses of children's lives and experiences, because they are contradictory, should cease and sees no value in critical debate and dialogue either

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83 "Defining Children's Literature and Childhood", *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Hunt, p. 19.

between empiricist critics or between such critics and herself – that, to adapt Butler's argument, rifts among critics over the content of the term children "ought to be safeguarded and prized".<sup>84</sup>

Lesnik-Oberstein's position is that these contradictions in 'children's literary criticism' can only be accounted for by "either accepting the notion of the 'child' as constructed ... or by maintaining that some critics are more correct about the child than others and adhering to their view".<sup>85</sup> In this way, she slides into an 'either-or-ist' position, supporting a strongly oppositional 'children' versus children stance and rejecting dialogue between the two positions: "[a] denial of ... the very constructed nature of childhood and the child can only revert to claims for the 'self-evident nature' of childhood" (p. 14, emphasis added). 'Children's literature criticism' is therefore lumped together (ignoring the many different approaches adopted by child literature critics) and dismissed. But Lesnik-Oberstein's generalised concept of 'children's literature criticism' has as many problems as the generalised concept of 'the child' of which she is so critical. As Meek observes of Lesnik-Oberstein's comments, "[c]hildren's literature criticism' seems to have about the same constructedness as is attributed to the 'child'".<sup>86</sup>

Against this background, Lesnik-Oberstein's assertion that "the most neglected area of discussion [in child literature criticism] is the issue of how adults should set about learning about children from children" (p. 13) is even more problematic and contradictory. First, she again suggests that 'children's literature criticism', including empiricist approaches, are not doing this, and talks about a "gap" in 'children's literature criticism' in looking at "responses from children about their reading" (p. 13) and the inability of critics to coordinate such work "into a coherent or useful body of theory" (p. 182). She therefore ignores the important work of critics such as Crago, Chambers and Stephens who work in this so-called "gap". Second, her argument here might also appear to erode her own strongly oppositional stance that "all 'children' are constructions" (p. 168). While, unlike Rose, Lesnik-Oberstein would therefore appear from these statements to support the possibility of saying something about children's lives and their experiences of texts (claiming that any work in this area that has taken place is minimal),<sup>87</sup> she also maintains that such work is contradictory and along with all other 'children's literature criticism', should be "left ... behind" (p. 167).

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84 "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", p. 15.

85 "Defining Children's Literature and Childhood", p. 19.

86 "The Constructedness of Children", p. 11. Further references will be in the text.

87 Lesnik-Oberstein states, for example, that "arguing for the discursive nature of the concept [of the child] does not mean to assert that there is no 'reality' to the notion of ... 'child', but, instead, that whatever level of 'reality' we assume or even establish, we attribute meanings to it in many different ways" (p. 29). As this comment indicates, she seeks to pursue a more complex position on the reality of children but the contradictions in that position raise questions about her approach.

Finally, in the context of all these claims, Lesnik-Oberstein concludes that 'children's literature criticism' is finished:

children's literature criticism, based, as I have argued, on the premiss of the 'real child', collapses with the abandonment of this 'real child'. It does not have any options. Without the 'real child' it has no reason to exist (p. 158) ... if children's literature criticism depends on, and is defined by, its claim to the existence of the 'real child', *a claim which it undermines itself*, then it is indeed dead. (p. 163)<sup>88</sup>

In "leaving children's literature criticism behind" (p. 167), Lesnik-Oberstein proposes an approach based on psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy.<sup>89</sup> While this approach, as she outlines it, opens up some useful directions for child literature criticism in terms of "creat[ing] a space within which the 'voice' of children *as 'individuals'* can be heard" (p. 188),<sup>90</sup> this should not be at the expense of other approaches (shutting out these approaches and denying that many child literature critics have opened up a similar space). It is of interest in this context to conclude my comments on Lesnik-Oberstein's work by contrasting her comments on Donald Winnicott (whom she perceives as offering the most effective psychoanalytical approach), Stephens' comments on subject positions and children, and Nodelman's comments on Stephens, to underline some major deficiencies in her stance.

Lesnik-Oberstein states of Winnicott –

[i]n the non-free situation between adults and children the adults can choose to define the 'child', steered by their own unacknowledged needs, or assume responsibility for self-reflecting on these needs in order to try to create a freedom within non-freedom for children (p. 188) ... Winnicott's acute awareness of – and painstaking striving to make space for – this complex process of mutual construction contrasts powerfully with the self-defeating operations of a children's literature criticism; (p. 225)

and Stephens states –

readers will (re-)construct their 'own' subject position in dialogue with the text; I think myself it is the best and most humane subject position available to us as human beings; I also recognise that in reaching it readers are thoroughly subjected to the text's processes (p. 287).

And Nodelman observes that what "impresses" him about Stephens' approach is the "degree of trust that it implies in the ability of children to move through uncertainties,

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88 She also comments that, "[i]n making judgements and criticism on behalf of a 'real child' who does not exist, [children's literature criticism] is useless to the fulfilment of its own professed aims" (p. 163) and that "children's literature criticism falls apart when the existence of its claimed 'real child' is challenged" (p. 185).

89 I will not go into Lesnik-Oberstein's approach here in detail – see pp. 165-225 of her study.

90 Lesnik-Oberstein has a point when she suggests that a "difficulty" exists in 'children's literature criticism' in terms of "simultaneously placing a higher value on the notion of individuality while also being greatly attached to categorization" (p. 166).

arrive at their own conclusions, and take a key part in the construction of their selves", and he adds:

Stephens expresses his own deep pleasure in some of the typical forms of children's fiction and defends it as good for children, even though he never forgets important ideological concerns. Even more importantly, his acceptance of the inevitability of our adult responsibility to help children construct their subjectivities leads him to suggest ways of exercising that responsibility that never deny its inherent repressiveness and therefore always express a humane respect for young, malleable human beings.<sup>91</sup>

As this bringing into dialogue of Lesnik-Oberstein, Stephens and Nodelman demonstrates, there are important parallels in their approaches. Stephens also emphasises this process of "mutual construction" and the importance of being self-critical/"self-reflecting" of the adults' investment in children, child literature and child literature criticism. Lesnik-Oberstein has missed the opportunity to build on this shared ground.

### *Children's experiences of texts*

Rose maintains that it is impossible to say something about children's experiences of texts – "the child's own experience of the book ... despite all attempts which have been made, I consider more or less impossible to gauge" (p. 9) – and therefore excludes/ignores this area of study. A number of critics have analysed children's experiences of the book and, although there are many acknowledged limitations with such work, it weakens Rose's argument to summarily dismiss it. While I agree with Rose's basic position that it is impossible to determine exactly children's experience of texts (in the sense of giving it a single, objective, stable meaning), it has been my position throughout this study that it is important to canvass the possibilities of this area. Hence, I am not arguing that there is a single or simple answer to the question of the nature of the reading experiences of children. Rather, I am seeking to explore the complexity of this question, to escape from the position that either there is nothing to be said about children's reading experiences or that everything can be said, and said unproblematically, about those reading experiences. My purpose then is to open up a critical space that has all too often be completely shut down and to engage with the important and complex issues raised by this area while recognising that they are *contested* issues. Rose misses the opportunity to look at what is said about children's experiences of text, just as Lesnik-Oberstein misses the opportunity to look at what is said about the reality of children, and to explore critics' claims to knowledge.

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91 "Humane Ideology", p. 177 and p. 178.

It is the notion of *knowing* children and their experiences that Lesnik-Oberstein and Rose regard as so suspect. They find such a position as both critically untenable and manipulative of children. As I have discussed, I firmly agree with aspects of their arguments here, but with two important exceptions: first, that this area (because of the questions it raises) cannot and should not be shut out and ignored and, second, that work on children's lives and experiences is important. We can know something of the reality of children and their experiences of literature but the crucial point is that we must accept that this knowledge is contingent and contested. Against this background, my move away from the concept of 'children's literature' (and 'children's literature criticism') but continued use of terms like 'children's lives and experiences' might seem contradictory given the dominant role that adults also play in these areas. As I have argued, however, the notion of having knowledge about 'children's lives and experiences' has always been questioned and contested and I have continued to question that notion while defending the importance of this issue. But, the term 'children's literature' (the notion of having knowledge about a literature for/of children) has *infrequently* been contested – except recently by Lesnik-Oberstein and Rose, who regard it as "impossible", a position that highly problematises any further discussion about the genre and its criticism, and tends to close down the conversation.

'Children's literature' and 'children's literature criticism' are powerful institutions/disciplines that needs re-thinking, unsettling and opening up for question. The terms 'child literature' and 'child literature criticism' serve the difficult task of both *critique* and *continuing the conversation* about the genre and its criticism.

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Relationship between the subject, text and social practices*

Rose takes a somewhat reductive position on the complex relationship between the subject, text and social practices (that while there is reader identification there is also resistance). Child fiction, she argues, "secures the identification of the child with something to which it does not necessarily belong. And it does so without the child being given the chance to notice, let alone question, the smoothness and ease of that process" (p. 63). In this way, she appears to emphasise reader identification and deny agency and resistance.<sup>92</sup> While Stephens has similar concerns as Rose with the subject positions constructed in child literature that covertly attract reader identification, he points to a more

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<sup>92</sup> Nodelman is also critical of this aspect of Rose's work, although he somewhat overstates his position, "[a]ccording to her logic, any attempt by adults to teach anything at all to children must be understood as an act of repression", "The Case of Children's Fiction: or The Impossibility of Jacqueline Rose", p. 98.

complex process of identity formation and meaning production, and also undertakes interesting work on interrogative subject positions.

### *Ethical critique*

Related to this, Rose's position on ethical critique is also at times contradictory and reductive. "My point here", she states, "is not to pass judgement on the relative moral or aesthetic virtues of these different forms of writing" (p. 61). By this statement, she would appear to reject an ethical critique of child literature. However, other statements make it clear that Rose *is* engaging in ethical critique, she is passing judgement on the "virtues" or otherwise of child literature: "[t]here is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes – these purposes are often perverse and mostly *dishonest*" (Rose, p. 10, emphasis added).

### **Introducing a critical discourse**

Accordingly, this thesis also argues for the *introduction* of a critical discourse that takes account of the difficulties in Rose's and Lesnik-Oberstein's work.

To conclude this chapter, I will turn to the third question posed at the beginning of this thesis: to what merits questioning in the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that inform the major contemporary critical approaches to child literature (the work of Wall, Chambers, Stephens and Hunt, as well as Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein)? As discussed in the previous chapter, these critical approaches illustrate the same tendencies to close down discussion on some issues while opening up discussion on other issues, such as children's lives and experiences of texts; book-centred critical norms; the construction of subject positions in and the narrative strategies of child texts; ethics and politics; and language and meaning (Wall, Chambers, Stephens and Hunt), as well as the divisions of class, race, gender as well as age-role; the difficulties of language and sexuality; the construction of 'the child'; and adults' investment in child literature and child literature criticism (Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein). My intent has been to bring these different critical approaches into dialogue, to focus on *where* are children and adults in the discipline (in particular, to relocate children in the discipline by urging the inclusion of accounts of children's lives and experiences of books, and children as authors and critics) as well as to focus on *who* and *what* are 'children' and 'adults'. The point of this thesis has been to map out a dialogic approach, although one that is always undercut by a 'rhetoric of disruption' so as to move towards a more (self)questioning, critical and comprehensive child literature criticism.

Drawing principally on the work of Hunt, Stephens and Rose (but also with reference to the work of many other critics), I would point to a number of useful re-reading strategies for child literature criticism.

Of interest are the construction of subject positions in and the narrative strategies of child literature texts, accepting with Stephens that, while readers may "actively engage with a text by constructing a subject position from within their everyday social practice in order to oppose the position implied by the text", texts can "firmly construct particular subject positions through the processes of focalization and inference making" (p. 81). (Some of the peripheral features of the text – cover design, publisher's summary, illustrations, chapter headings – that are not often examined would also be of interest in this context.)

The critic might also consider how different texts of child literature might appear when certain reading skills are taken away (an approach explored by Hunt).<sup>93</sup> I do not suggest that this approach reveals how child readers typically read. Such an approach is interesting primarily in terms of the issues it suggests concerning how developing readers might possibly read<sup>94</sup> (a group that child readers certainly fall into) and in providing a different perspective on the text that unsettles/disrupts other critical approaches. This critical approach achieves a re-reading of child fiction, an anti-reading or counter-reading of the text. It is important, as Hunt suggests, to understand more about the reading process (a direction that I cannot take here but support) to work through these conclusions with child readers themselves.<sup>95</sup> This is the work that Chambers, Crago, Stephens and other critics have undertaken, and I would signal the relevance and importance of such work.

It would also be of interest to explore some of the observations from Rose's and Stephens' work concerning the absence/presence of metafictional strategies employed by various child literature texts; to look at how these texts have engaged with the difficulties (of language, violence, sexuality) and divisions (of class, race, age-role, history, gender) and issues of ethics and politics; and to consider the images of 'the child' and 'the adult' constructed in these texts. As well, there are the broader strategies, drawing on feminist theory, that I outlined at the close of Chapter 5.

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93 This is not to fall into the trap, however, of suggesting that language can be "totally ordered and cohered" (Rose, p. 65) – that with greater reading 'competence' we can gain mastery over language.

94 It is important to be aware, as Hunt emphasises, of not falling into the kinds of problems evident in Fish's early work in reader-response theory in terms of positioning a "cretinous reader who has to lumber along each line of text, constantly surprised by the next lexical or grammatical development" (Hunt, p. 94).

95 While Hunt does not undertake empirical work in his study, he signals a strong interest in combining his approach with empirical research. Crago comments, for example, that "Hunt's programme for childist readings of children's books needs to be supplemented by a growing body of ... data about the recorded responses of actual children", "A Signal Conversation" (p. 139).



Building on some of these strategies and on the critical approach I have been exploring in this thesis, Chapter 7 will focus on the *complexity* of the portrayal of adults and children in Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* and Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and offer a re-reading of these texts.

**Part Four**

**Critical Re-Readings**

## Chapter 7

### Alan Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* and Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Building on the critical approach I have been exploring in this thesis, this chapter will briefly consider the portrayal of adults and children in Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* and Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the opposition of adults versus children, I want to look at incidences where rigidities in this and related oppositions break down so that as well as appreciating important differences between adults and children, we also perceive their commonalities/similarities (without reducing 'the Other' to 'the Same'). Hence, of interest is the *complexity* of the portrayal of adults and children, that is, where the opposition between adults and children is not treated as clear-cut and a scope of positions is explored (going beyond a simple inversion of hierarchies), allowing multiple perspectives and opening up more interesting insights.

My approach explores the portrayal of adults and children through a series of oppositional terms that are frequently associated with adults and children: strong versus weak; sameness versus difference; experience versus innocence; away/independence versus home/family; authority versus anarchy; innovation versus repetition; adult literature versus child literature; and cultural decay versus cultural preservation. There are many other areas that could also be included here for discussion.

There is insufficient scope at this point in my thesis to undertake a detailed re-reading of Garner's and Dahl's work. In the limited space remaining, what I therefore want to do instead is provide a series of brief comments against each of the areas listed above to gesture towards ways in which the portrayal of adults and children in Garner's and Dahl's work might be re-read as being more complex (or less complex) than previously perceived.

#### **Strong versus weak**

Dahl frequently inverts the values traditionally attributed to strength (superiority) and weakness (inferiority), problematising any straightforward view of physical weakness/vulnerability as a deficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> My comments will also touch on other of Garner's and Dahl's works.

The adult hero-companions in Dahl's books<sup>2</sup> (with whom the readers' sympathies are meant to lie) are often described as small and weak. Charlie's Grandpa Joe is "delicate and weak"<sup>3</sup> and Matilda's Miss Honey is "so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over she would smash into a thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure".<sup>4</sup> As Sophie's companion, the BFG, sums up, "I is the titchy one. I is the runt".<sup>5</sup>

Both Miss Honey and the BFG are portrayed as superior to the strong, powerful villains to which they are opposed. Miss Trunchbull has a "bull-neck, big shoulders, thick arms, sinewy wrists and powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half" (*Mat*, p. 83). Similarly, the other giants in *The BFG* are "simply colossal ... at least fifty feet tall with huge muscles" (p. 36).

Power reversal is another theme in Dahl's books. Dahl often inverts the power relations that traditionally represent the adult-child relationship, particularly in terms of his adult villains. In *The Witches*, the "all-powerful" Grand High Witch<sup>6</sup> is transformed into a tiny, vulnerable mouse by the child hero, and three characters – George's Grandma and Mr and Mrs Twit – are, through the actions of the child(-like) heroes, made to shrink so that they eventually disappear:

Grandma was the size of a matchstick and still shrinking fast ... 'Hooray,' said Mr Kranky. 'She's gone! She's disappeared completely!' cried Mrs Kranky. 'That's what happens to you if you're grumpy and bad-tempered,' said Mr Kranky<sup>7</sup>

[a]nd their bodies began SHRINKING into their legs ... And their legs began SHRINKING into their feet ... And one week later ... there was nothing more left in this world of Mr and Mrs Twit. And everyone, including Fred, shouted ... 'Hooray!'<sup>8</sup>

Dahl's presentation of these issues is made more complex by the interesting twists in his plots and character portrayals, and in the interactions between various characters. There are many examples here but one that I find particularly interesting concerns *The Witches*. The boy hero (who is never given a name), is transformed (like the villains of the book, the witches) into a tiny, vulnerable mouse (or rather, a mouse-boy who retains the

2 Matilda neatly defines the role of the hero companion: "[w]hat she needed was just one person, one wise and sympathetic grown up", *Matilda* (London: Puffin Books, 1989), p. 170.

3 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1978), p. 18. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *CCF*.

4 *Matilda*, p. 66. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *Mat*.

5 *The BFG* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1987), p. 36. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *BFG*.

6 *The Witches* (London: Puffin Books, 1985), p. 39. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *W*.

7 *George's Marvellous Medicine* (London: Puffin Books, 1982), pp. 110-112. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *GMM*.

8 *The Twits* (London: Puffin Books, 1982), p. 95. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *TT*.

powers of human speech). He becomes, in this way, an even smaller, weaker 'child-figure' who, through his confrontation with the adult witches, has been seriously harmed; he has only nine years left to live: "I'm afraid a mouse doesn't live for a very long time" (W, p. 195). Nothing can reverse this transformation and so the boy will be forever small and powerless, and forever dependent upon his grandmother. Hence, Dahl moves away from a simple (although at times effective) reversal of hierarchies where the child is portrayed as more powerful than the adult, or where weakness is valued over strength, to a more complex portrayal of strength and weakness, power and vulnerability. Clearly, the situation of the boy in *The Witches* is more complex than such inversions – it raises many questions and merits much closer attention.

Also of interest in this context is that, in the film version of *The Witches*, the mouse-boy is turned back into child at the end of the film. Perhaps the original ending was considered too unsettling. The book version of *The Witches* celebrates the death of the child at the same time as the adult. The boy wants to die at the same time as his grandmother: "I would never want to live longer than you' ... I'll be a very old mouse and you'll be a very old grandmother and soon after that we'll both die together' ... 'That would be perfect,' [his Grandmother] said" (p. 196) *The Witches* is, like *Peter Pan*, about a child who will never grow up.

### Sameness versus difference

It is interesting that many of the adult villains in Dahl's books dismiss/deny 'the otherness of the Other' (the child). Some adults, for example, deny that they were ever children. Miss Trunchbull states, "[n]asty dirty things, little girls are. Glad I never was one ... Not for long anyway ... I became a woman very quickly! (p. 86) ... I was *never* a small person ... I have been large all my life ... *Me!* A baby! How dare you suggest such a thing" (*Mat*, p. 151). The giants avoid childhood altogether, "[g]iants isn't born ... Giants *appears* and that's all there is to it" (*BFG*, p. 50).

Other adults want children to be exactly the same as themselves (therefore reducing 'the Other' to 'the Same'). George's Grandma, for example, in an interesting reversal, wants him to *stop* growing and stay the same size as herself:

'[y]ou're *growing* too fast. Boys who grow too fast become stupid and lazy' ... 'But we *have* to grow, Grandma. If we didn't grow, we'd never be grown-ups.' 'Rubbish, boy, rubbish,' Grandma said. 'Look at me. Am I growing? Certainly not ... I gave up growing when I was extremely small, along with all the other nasty childish habits'. (*GMM*, p. 10)

The variety of ways in which Dahl handles issues of being 'an adult' and being 'a child', of growing up and not growing up, are numerous and complex. Matilda, for example, is described as "a grown-up child" (*Mat*, p. 195) while Grandpa Joe, "when Charlie, his

beloved grandson, was in the room, seemed in some marvellous way to grow quite young again ... he became as eager and excited as a young boy" (*CCF*, p. 18).

### Experience versus innocence

One of the issues I discussed in previous chapters (drawing on Rose's work) was the way in which the child was often portrayed as being outside/not part of the difficulties (violence, sexuality, language) and divisions (class, race, gender) of society. This has the tendency to set up an opposition where the child is portrayed as innocent of these difficulties and divisions and the adult as experienced (immersed in these difficulties and divisions). One way in which Dahl's texts problematise such a portrayal is by associating the child reader with what most adults would consider to be violent and somewhat impolite language. There are many examples here (I have listed two of the more extreme):

[t]hat face of hers was the most frightful and frightening thing I have ever seen ... There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there (*W*, p. 66)<sup>9</sup>

[Grandma] had pale brown teeth and a small puckered up mouth like a dog's bottom (*GMM*, p. 8)

As Stephens has suggested of 'transgressive' texts, the reader may shift among positions ranging from 'empathy, delight, superiority, criticism, outrage, [and] revulsion" (p. 124). Certainly, Dahl unsettles straightforward notions of a 'language suitable for children', and again his work merits closer attention on this aspect. As these extracts suggest, Dahl's work cannot be simply regarded either as an advocate of old-fashioned morality or as completely liberating in its ethics/politics.

### Away/independence versus home/family

The 'home-adventure-home' sequence, where the hero leaves home for an adventure and then returns safely home afterwards, is a common one in child literature. Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* provides a good example of this theme. Dahl, however, frequently employs an 'home-adventure-new home' sequence with this new home usually being nothing like the child hero's previous home. In this new home the child is often without his/her parents, siblings and relations: the child heroes either set up home by themselves or they go to live with their adult hero-companions. Dahl therefore challenges traditional notions of the family and home, what these traditionally comprise, and provides images of alternative family structures.

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<sup>9</sup> Such a description would not be out of place in a Steven King novel.

Matilda, for example, leaves her parents and brother to go and live with Miss Honey: "'Daddy and mummy!' Matilda burst out ... 'I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss Honey'" (*Mat*, p. 238). When her parents and brother leave by car, "her brother gave a wave ... but the other two didn't even look back" (p. 240). What were once Matilda's parents have now become 'the other two'. Similarly, neither James (*James and the Giant Peach*), Sophie (*The BFG*) or Charlie (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) returns to their old homes. Each sets up a new home either with a new 'family' or by themselves.

In this way, many of Dahl's child characters are not part of a conventional, 'happy ending'. Rather, it is a negotiated ending, with both goods and bads. James lives alone in Central Park, although he "now has all the friends and playmates in the world";<sup>10</sup> Matilda leaves her dysfunctional family to live with her teacher, Miss Honey; and Sophie lives by herself, although the BFG lives next-door.

### Authority versus anarchy

The central concern of Dahl's texts is the power structures in place between adults and children. His work has frequently been viewed as challenging adult authority per se but in fact can be viewed as challenging the *abuse* of adult authority. Dahl's books all revolve around an adult authority/power figure who abuses his or her authority/power over less powerful members of society, particularly children. The adult hero companions represent just authority. The villains are usually destroyed or punished with the prior approval of the adult hero companions, who have themselves been harassed by these villains. An exception here is George in *George's Marvellous Medicine* whose decision to kill his grandmother is made by himself alone, although his parents support him once the deed is done.

The adult authority figures that come under most scrutiny are parents and parent substitutes (aunts and grandmothers), teachers and the traditional power figures from the fairytale such as witches and giants. The adult villains in Dahl's books all openly reveal their dislike of children. Hatred of the child is the main theme of *The Witches*. The words 'children' and 'child' are continually associated with filth, dirt and stench: "'[c]hildren are foul and filthy ... Children are dirty and stinky ... Children are smelling of *dog's droppings*'" (p. 77). Although the witches do not "knock children on the head or stick knives into them" (*W*, p. 9), they eradicate children in other ways. This is perhaps the most bleak assessment in Dahl's books of the opposition between adult and child: the child as excrement and the adult as child-murderer. Matilda's parents look upon her "as

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<sup>10</sup> *James and the Giant Peach* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1979), p. 110. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation *JGP*.

nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away" (p. 10). And for James living with his tyrannical aunts, "[t]oday and tomorrow and the next day and all other days as well would be nothing but punishment and pain, unhappiness and despair" (*JGP*, p. 18).

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is an unusual text in that, unlike most of Dahl's other books, it does not have an adult villain who abuses his power and authority. However, in the absence of a villain the character of Mr Wonka assumes many of the villain's characteristics. In trying to decide who should run his chocolate factory when he grows too old to do it himself, Mr Wonka comments, "I don't want a grown-up person at all. A grown-up won't listen to me; he won't learn. He will try to do things his own way and not mine. So I have to have a child" (*CCF*, p. 130). It is clear that while Mr Wonka wants a child to run his factory, he does not want just *any* child. He wants a child who will be dutiful, docile, manageable, dependent and obedient, a boy just like Charlie. The constant image of Charlie holding on tight to his grandfather's hand reinforces his timidity and dependency:

holding tightly on to his hand, was little Charlie Bucket (p. 55) ... 'Don't you let go my hand, Charlie' (p. 61) ... Charlie was holding tightly on to his grandfather's bony old hand (p. 77) ... 'Keep a good hold of my hand, Charlie' (p. 93) ... Little Charlie caught Grandpa Joe's hand. (p. 120)

Hence it is important to stress that Dahl's books do not liberate children per se just as they are not critical of adult power per se.

### **Innovation versus repetition**

Dahl's work has generally been regarded by critics as less innovative than Garner's work. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, Sarland has pointed to the range of innovative narrative techniques in his work, commenting that: "[w]hen John Fowles offers the reader alternative endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; or when Italo Calvino begins his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* thus, 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel' ... neither author is doing anything qualitatively different from what Dahl is doing" (p. 167). None of the critics on Dahl's work have commented, however, on key element of plot that is repeated over and over in his books:

[Sophie] cried out, 'I've got it! By golly, I think I've got it ... It's a terrific idea!' (*BFG*, p. 118)

'I believe I've got just a tiny little bit of an idea' (*Mat*, p. 207)

'I've just had a bit of an idea', Mr Fox said carefully<sup>11</sup>

'Grandmamma ... I may have a bit of an idea' (*W*, p. 132)

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<sup>11</sup> *Fantastic Mr Fox* (London: Puffin Books, 1988), p. 49.



'So-ho thought George suddenly. *Ah-ha! Ho-hum!* I know exactly what I'll do' (GMM, p. 20)

'There is something that I believe we might try' (JGP, p. 56)

'Now and again', he said, 'but not very often, I have a brilliant idea. This is one of them' (TT, p. 68)

'Dad ... wait a minute ... I've just had a bit of an idea'<sup>12</sup>

and even as [Mr Hoppy] said it his mind suddenly went *click* and an amazing idea came rushing into his head<sup>13</sup>

This continual use of this plot device (the hero's 'brilliant idea') merits further consideration in terms of the narrative techniques in Dahl's work.

### Adult literature versus child literature

Garner's books have often been regarded as being for adults as well as for children (see Appendix C, particularly Philip's treatment of Garner's work as adult literature). Of interest in this context is the recent publication of Garner's first adult book, *Strandloper*.<sup>14</sup> This book not only includes many phrases from his child book, the *Stone Book Quartet* (something that stood out for me when I first read *Strandloper*), but also characters from the *Quartet*. When the main character in *Strandloper*, William Buckley, returns to England to visit the woman he had loved many years before, this woman turns out to be the mother of Robert, the stonemason father of Mary in *The Stone Book*.<sup>15</sup> Such intertextual allusions work to set up interesting linkages between Garner's child books and his adult writing (the line between which is particularly blurred in Garner's case) that open up issues for further study. Dahl's work, as discussed in Chapter 3, opens up similar areas for discussion through his frequently commented upon use of the story of Danny as both an adult short story ("The Champion of the World"<sup>16</sup>) and as the child book, *Danny, the Champion of the World*.

### Cultural decay versus cultural preservation

Rose's critique of Garner's work is based on the opposition she perceives he sets up between cultural preservation and decay. She highlights the way in which Garner's child fiction "places on the child's shoulders the responsibility for saving humankind from the degeneracy of modern society" (p. 43). There is a continuity in child fiction, she suggests, that runs from Rousseau through to Garner, where "the child is constantly set

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12 *Danny, The Champion of the World* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1979), p. 85. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation DCW.

13 *Esio Trot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), p. 20.

14 *Strandloper* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996).

15 Philip highlights this point in a recent essay, "England's Dreaming", *Signal*, 82 (1997), p. 15.

16 In *Kiss, Kiss* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), pp. 225-255.

up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history, which it can therefore be used to retrieve" (p. 43). Both writers establish childhood as "a primitive state where 'nature' is still to be found if only one gets to it in time" (p. 44). The child is innocent and can restore that innocence to us. The child is placed "in a rural community of ironsmiths, stonemasons and agricultural labour" and here in "moments of recognition uncontaminated by industry or literacy – the child reads off from the land, the earth and the sky, its own truth and a nature which would otherwise perish" (p. 44).

Certainly, Garner's work, particularly the *Stone Book Quartet* can be read in this way. William, the central child character in *Tom Fobble's Day*, and Mary, the central child character in *The Stone Book*, both make a connection with the past, with his or her cultural ancestry, embodied in the traditional crafts of stonemasonry, weaving and smithing: "[h]e was not alone on a sledge. There was a line, and he could feel it. It was line through hand and eye, block, forge and loom to the hill. He owned them all: and they owned him".<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Mary is led by her father down into a cave under Glaze Hill (the same hill upon which William later sleds) where she finds an ancient painting of a bull, a stonemason's mark (like her father's) and an outline of a child's hand marked in clay that matches her own: "[t]he sky seemed a different place. All things led to the bull and the mark and the hand in the cave".<sup>18</sup> Mary's father tells her that "[w]e have to go before we're too big to get past the fall, though I reckon, years back, the road was open; if you knew where it was" (p. 41). Only the child can now recapture the meaning of these signs, recapture the values and traditions embodied in the past, values and traditions that are threatened by the progress (regress?) of modern society: "if they keep on stoping after that malachite the way they're going", Mary's father tells her, "it'll be shovelled up in a year or two ... And if the old bull goes, you'll have to tell your lad, even if you can't show him" (p. 48).

There are other ways of reading Garner's work, however, that indicate a more complex treatment of cultural preservation and decay. In particular, I would highlight Nodelman's more nuanced re-reading of Garner's work. He suggests that Rose "ignores the complexities of *The Stone Book* itself, which ambiguously allows its 'message' of nostalgia for the values of the past to be expressed in terms of a victory of ideas of evolution (ideas which are new and radical in the time it describes) over traditional religious ideas, and also the complexities of the *Stone Book Quartet* as a whole, which

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<sup>17</sup> *Tom Fobble's Day* in the *Stone Book Quartet* (London: Collins, 1983), p. 216. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation, *TFD*.

<sup>18</sup> *The Stone Book* in the *Stone Book Quartet*, p. 46. Further references to this work will appear in the text denoted by the abbreviation, *SB*.

continually plays the rigidity of conservatism against its stability, and the freedom of new ideas against their anarchy".<sup>19</sup>

Mary's father, Robert, for example, questions traditional religious ideas:

'[w]hen you cut stone, you see more than the parson does' (p. 26) ... 'And I'm asking parson, if it was Noah's flood, where was the urchin before? How long do stones take to grow? And how do urchins get in stones? (p. 28) ... I reckon that if you're going to put the sea in a hill and turn the world over and let it dry, then you've got to be doing before nine o'clock in the morning. But preachers aren't partial to coming down here, so it doesn't matter.' (SB, p. 36)

Robert (a stonemason) and his brother, William (a weaver), argue about the implications of the changes they see happening around them. Robert sees that to survive one must bend with the times rather than resist. As he later says (in *Granny Reardun*), "[t]hem as can't bend, like as not they break".<sup>20</sup> Robert tells Mary that, "[t]he trouble with [William] is ... he's as good as me [in his craft], but can't ever see the end of his work. And I make it worse by building houses for the big masters who've taken his living. That's what it is, but we never say" (SB, p. 31).

War – a craft of breaking rather than making – is also questioned in Garner's books. In *The Aimer Gate*, Uncle Charlie's 'craft' is war and there is a constant image of him cleaning his rifle, one of the tools of his craft: "[h]e cleaned his rifle all the time, rubbing linseed into the wood and fine oil on the metal".<sup>21</sup> The young boy Robert (the great-grandson of Robert in *The Stone Book*) is unable to appreciate his father's craft and later indicates that, like his Uncle Charlie, he will choose war as his 'craft': "I can be a soldier if I want ... The marching and that ... And they give you medals, same as you and Mister Allman" (p. 154). Uncle Charlie shoots rabbits and demonstrates his 'craft' to Robert: "[t]hat's my trade ... I stop rabbits skriking. There's me craft, and there's my mastery" (p. 164).

Like Mary in *The Stone Book*, the young Robert has a 'secret' cave, a small room at the top of the chapel steeple: "[i]t was Robert's secret cave ... But the soft floor was covered with footprints, shoes and clogs and boots of every size ... as though all the children

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19 "The Case of Children's Fiction: or The Impossibility of Jacqueline Rose", p. 99. Similarly, Mavis Reimer observes that, while the "potency" of Garner's work "certainly has to do with the preservation of family myth and tradition", it is "also something more. Solitary, intellectual, forward-looking pursuits are seen ... as activities that may generate new meanings and understandings". Reimer argues that at the conclusion of each of the stories that make up the *Stone Book Quartet*, "the child is given a gift that suggests a balance, but not a resolution, of the two ways of knowing – aspiration and preservation, intellect and instinct, the solitary and the communal", "The Family as Mythic Reservoir in Alan Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*", p.134.

20 *Granny Reardun* in the *Stone Book Quartet*, p. 63. Further references will be in the text denoted by the abbreviation GR.

21 *The Aimer Gate* in the *Stone Book Quartet*, p. 103. Further references will be in text denoted by the abbreviation AG.

from the village and the Moss and the Hough played here" (AG, p. 126). But (unlike Mary) Robert cannot appreciate its significance: "[he] was wearing the steeple all the way to the earth, a stone dunce's cap" (p. 128). Similarly, when Mary touches the markings in the cave under Leah's Hill, she discovered that "[s]he wasn't alone ... All about her in that small place under the hill that led nowhere were footprints ... hundreds pressed in the clay were only a dozen could stand" (SB, pp. 44-45). And when the young boy William slides down the hill on a sled constructed of materials from his family's past, he discovers that "[h]e was not alone on a sledge" (TFD, p. 216). The rock-painting, hand and stonemason's mark, and the loom, forge and block link past and present generations. However, when Robert stands at the very top of the steeple, he finds himself "alone all at once" (AG, p. 129).

Garner's attempt to by-pass the imperfections of language is also commented on by Rose: "[t]he idea that you can read the true history of the world from objects, and out of the earth, is a recurrent one in Garner's books" (p. 45). Children are seen to be directly in touch with these objects because they are of the same primitive state and hence "are given access to a mythical past" (p. 45). "Apart from everything else that this philosophy attempts to sidestep", she continues, "one of its central concerns is to retrieve a form of language or expression which would be uncontaminated by the intrusion of the verbal sign. Objects speak directly" (p. 46).

Garner's work lends itself to such a reading. Mary's father, for example, describes time at school as time lost: "[i]t'd be fourpence a week, and all the time you'd have lost" (SB, p. 21). Learning and understanding lie in natural objects, in the earth and the stone: "there was a man, him as sank this shaft, and he could read books and put a letter together. But he lost his money, for all his reading. Now if he'd read rocks instead of books, it might have been a different story, you see" (SB, pp. 37-38). This recalls Rousseau's comment: "[w]hat is the use of inscribing in [child] heads a catalogue of signs which represent nothing for them? In learning the things, will they not learn the signs?"<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to compare Garner's treatment of reading and books with Dahl's. Mary wants a real book but is given a stone book by her father: "[a] book has only one story" whereas Mary's stone book with the fossil of a plant inside it contains "all the stories of the world and the flowers of the flood" (SB, p. 51). Dahl is far from agreeing with Rousseau that "[r]eading is the plague of childhood".<sup>23</sup> Matilda is uncorrupted by the 'degeneracy' of modern society (television-watching, for example) *because* she is a "reader of books" (Mat, p. 7):

<sup>22</sup> *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> *Émile*, p. 116.

[s]he knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so. All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television. (pp. 28-29)

Mary's father in Garner's *The Stone Book* advocates "rocks instead of books" (*SB*, p. 37) and Matilda's father in *Matilda* advocates that "[l]ooks is more important than books" (*Mat*, p. 96). Again, such views merit closer study.

In a brief way, this has been to present some of the images related to the portrayal of adults and children that emerged from my re-reading of Garner's and Dahl's work. This leads me to conclude this thesis.

## Conclusion

[D]ialogic communication presupposes ... a certain 'good will' – at least in the willingness to really listen, to seek to understand what is genuinely other, different, alien, and the courage to risk one's more cherished prejudgments. (Bernstein, p. 51)

This thesis has proposed the terms '(adults') child literature' and 'child literature criticism'/'child critical theory' instead of the more usual 'children's literature' and 'children's literature criticism'. 'Child literature' defines a literature written (almost entirely) by adults that assumes various conceptions of 'the child', 'childhood' and 'the childlike', with child readers being (usually) the target of the book.

The purpose of this redefinition is to call the genre what it is: '*adults*' child literature' rather than 'children's literature'. My purpose is to redefine this literature not in terms of its audience (an audience that cannot be precisely defined) as does Hunt – "children's literature defines itself in terms (uniquely) of its audience" (p. 56) – but in terms of its construction of 'the child'. As Townsend and many other critics have emphasised, 'children's books' are "written by adults, they are read by adults for adult publishers, they are reviewed by adults, they are bought by adults. This is inevitable. But the result is that a children's book can go far on the road to success before a single child has seen it".<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'children's literature' is therefore "arbitrary" (Townsend)<sup>2</sup> and "impossible" (Rose).

These new terms – 'child literature' and 'child literature criticism' – have several important effects. First, they focus attention upfront on 'the child' as a construction, so requiring authors, readers, and critics to rethink and question the concept of 'the child' and any straightforward notion of a 'children's fiction' – that, as Rose observes, "there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple" (p. 1). The term 'children's literature' suggests a natural and unproblematic relationship between children and fiction, and it leaves out any mention of adults. This focus on 'the child' as a construction in turn focuses attention on broader epistemological issues concerning language and meaning, as well as on issues of ethics and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> "Didacticism in Modern Dress", p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> That we can often make a clear differentiation between a book published for adults and a book published for children – identify their different characteristics – simply means that we can tell one type of book from another type of book. We can tell that one book was published for adults and that one book was published for children but this does not mean that these books *belong* to children and to adults.

Second, the term 'adults' child literature' focuses attention on what might be adults' investment in 'the child'. It emphasises that adults need to take responsibility for that word *adults*' in the term 'adults' child literature'. This emphasis opens up a series of important ethical and political issues, and encourages a move towards a more comprehensive and (self)critical ethical/political stance.

Third, these new terms reclaim the genre for adults (this is *not* to say they take the genre away from children). Given that adults write, produce, read and critique child literature and the somewhat arbitrary nature of the terms 'adults' literature' and 'children's literature' (that some 'adults' literature' is read by children and some 'children's literature' is read by adults),<sup>3</sup> there appears to be a great reluctance on the part of adults to openly accept this as their genre. With this acceptance, child literature and child literature criticism can join adult literature and its criticism (without denying the 'otherness' of child literature and its criticism) to the mutual benefit and enrichment of both areas. Adults are then free to read and analyse child literature without the confusion that comes with the term 'children's literature' eroding these activities (suggesting that these activities are *childish/trivial/irrelevant* or *not appropriate/relevant* to broader literature criticism and theory).

This was, I think, the point that Townsend and a number of the book-centred critics sought to make. However this point was complicated and undermined by their recourse to prescriptive statements about the genre (that a "good children's book must not only be pleasing to children: it must be a good book in its own right"<sup>4</sup>); their flat rejection of the responses of child readers ("[w]hatever critical theory we produce for children's literature, it will have little or nothing to do with children ... it is irrelevant to consult children on the quality or value of their books, and positively dangerous to generalize from any findings"<sup>5</sup>); and their somewhat muddled critical thinking overall. While it is possible to discuss child literature without reference to (the input of) child readers (as in the way Philips and a number of other critics have approached Garner's child books<sup>6</sup>), the implications of my earlier comments (particularly the investment that adults have in the construction of 'the child') set up an important tension in adults' reclamation of child literature in such a way (in assimilating child literature to adult literature).

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3 As Shavit observes, the author of child literature is "perhaps the only one who is asked to address one particular audience and at the same time to appeal to another". Society expects the writer of child literature "to be appreciated by both adults and children", *Poetics of Children's Literature*, p. 37.

4 Townsend, *Written for Children* (1983), p. 13.

5 Hunt, "Criticism and Children's Literature", p. 119 and p. 120.

6 See Appendix C.

Fourth, the terms 'child literature' and 'child literature criticism' also serve to problematise/unsettle broader criticism, theory and philosophy. Child literature criticism opens up numerous and diverse issues frequently neglected or ignored by this body of criticism, theory and philosophy concerning *age-role* construction. In this respect, the questions that child critical theory poses of broader criticism, theory and philosophy resemble the type of questions posed by feminist theory. Both feminist and child critical theories are important in terms of opening up new approaches and readings of texts (about the treatment of gender/age-role issues and the silences on these issues). The term 'child literature' also problematises the status of those 'adult' texts that assume various concepts of 'the child' (such as *Lolita*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *Jane Eyre* and many of Dickens' novels). This not only opens up such texts to questions concerning age-role issues but also sets up an interesting tension where these texts begin to fall towards the definition of 'child literature'.

Fifth, the term 'child literature criticism' does not exclude empirical/standpoint work on children (their lives and experiences) or the notion of children as critics. Rather, these developments are encouraged with the removal of the problematic term 'children's' and the clarification of the 'children'/children question.

Sixth, this redefining of terms frees up space for a *children's literature* – a literature written by children – hence broadening and enriching our existing body of literature.

Seventh, the term 'child literature' does not deny that children want, need and deserve a literature. It does not remove such literature from children.

And finally, these new terms offer a way out of the current stalemate position evident in contemporary 'children's literature criticism'. On the one hand, 'children's literature (criticism)' is viewed as '*impossible*', which means shutting down the genre and its criticism (as Lesnik-Oberstein appears to do) and losing the work which has been undertaken to date. On the other hand, 'children's literature (criticism)' is viewed as *possible* but these possibilities are hugely undermined by the confusion created by the term 'children's literature', as is illustrated by arguments like Hunt's, for example, that historical 'children's literature' no longer constitutes 'children's literature': "Edgeworth, Day, and Barbauld ... whose books, it may be argued, *were once* children's literature ... have now ceased to be so" (p. 22). Again, such statements impoverish the genre and shut down important areas of study. The notion of 'child literature (criticism)' offers a way of thinking through these difficulties while retaining the genre and its critical discourse. It does not shut down particular areas of discussion (because they are perceived to be 'impossible') or ignore problems with



that genre (in assuming that addressing children is completely unproblematic). Rather, it seeks to extend and continue the discussion.

The notion of 'adults' child literature' therefore opens up a rich area to explore without the misleading concepts of a 'children's literature' and a 'children's literature criticism' – of a literature *belonging* to children and a critical discourse on that literature which *liberates* child readers. As I have discussed, there is a lot more going on behind the terms of 'belonging', 'liberating' and 'children'.

In summary, as discussed in the body of this thesis, I accept Rose's position that adults will always have an investment in the concept of 'the child' and in the literature and critical discourse that underpin that concept. Further, regardless of whether this investment is perceived as liberating or repressive, it is still an investment and what might lie behind this investment needs to be made visible. I have therefore argued for the reintroduction of a critical discourse on child literature, that is, a *reintroduction* of Rose's critical approach, an important approach that has been neglected, dismissed or misappropriated by critics.

This thesis has also sought to arrive at a more comprehensive and critical account of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers by not shutting out analyses of children's lives and reading experiences (areas that Rose appears to reject) and by engaging with the complexities of language and meaning and ethics and politics (issues on which Rose's work at times merits questioning). I have therefore also argued for the *introduction* of a critical discourse on child literature, one that goes beyond Rose's approach. Hence, the title of my thesis: a (re)introduction of a critical discourse on child literature.

Child literature and child literature criticism are excellent sites for exploring the kinds of questions that have concerned broader criticism, theory and philosophy, as well as for raising many important new questions. My readings in feminist theory have demonstrated that a rich area of dialogue is possible between feminist theory and child theory (a dialogue that is mutually both unsettling and insightful). But while there is much 'to-and-fro' play of dialogue between feminist critical theories and child critical theories, this 'to-and-fro' play of dialogue has barely begun between 'mainstream' critical theories and child critical theories, or has tended to be all one way. Where have theorists such as Habermas, Gadamer, Rorty and Bernstein engaged with age-role issues, for example? Bernstein acknowledges how appeals to dialogue and communicative rationality *can* and *have been* repressive, and points to the importance of feminist critique in this context: "[t]he so-called 'conversation of mankind' has been just that – a conversation of *mankind*, primarily white mankind" (p. 51). But

while Bernstein's ethics and politics of dialogue is therefore sensitive to issues of gender and race, it ignores issues of age-role: that this has primarily been a conversation of *middle-aged adult* mankind. Child literature and its critical discourse therefore have much to bring to, as well as gain from, broader literature and its critical discourse.

Child literature and its critical discourse are significant in the larger map of literature and theory. (This can be said without falling into the trap of idealising child literature and child literature theory.) However, they have been for too long (and perhaps deliberately) marginalised and segregated from general literature, criticism and theory. Child literature and child literature theory have much to contribute to the conversation (they do not merely represent the 'different' voice of Otherness). If we accept that this is a literature for which adults are responsible – that belongs to adults, that it is *adults'* child literature – this should no longer be the case. As I have sought to emphasise, this does not finally exclude children but, by clarifying some significant issues in the criticism and theory of child literature, seeks to include children and child readers on less confused and confusing terms.

In the three parts of this thesis, I have brought into dialogue child literature theories (past and present, book-centred and child-centred), feminist theories (empiricist, standpoint, postmodernist) and the theories of Habermas and Derrida, Bernstein and Rorty, Leavis and Richards, Norris and Fish, in order to look at what these theories are saying both in terms of the five questions posed at the start of this thesis and in terms of my broader concerns with language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers. This has not been to suggest that these theorists' different positions can be finally brought together in some overarching theoretical perspective but more to look at ways in which they both *complement* and are *in tension* with each other.

While the critics discussed in Part One (Townsend, Cameron, Rees, Merrick, Meek, Leavis, the New Critics and Richards) may have been mistaken in seeking strong foundations, they have nevertheless contributed important insights by way of their different discursive strategies. To ignore these critics is to lose the insights to be gained from re-reading them. More typically, contemporary commentators have been concerned with highlighting "the kind of authority that past epistemological theories do not have, while ignoring the question of the kind of authority they might have".<sup>7</sup> Similarly, while the contemporary theorists discussed in Part Two may have occasionally opened up issues to a problematical 'endless' extent or alternatively

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<sup>7</sup> Fairlamb, *Critical Conditions*, p. 63.

closed down a number of significant issues, they have opened up other important areas of discussion shut down by earlier critics.

I have emphasised in this thesis the need to engage in dialogue with other critical approaches – to listen and be responsive to what 'the Other' is saying, to seek out both points of difference (without dismissing 'the Other') and commonalities (without denying the otherness of 'the Other') – noting, however, that *how* I/we/other critics perceive these approaches to be in tension and complementary to one another can only ever be a temporary resting point: "[t]here are no algorithms for grasping what is held in common and what is genuinely different. Indeed, commonality and difference are themselves historically conditioned and shifting" (Bernstein, p. 66). While, as Bernstein observes, "this commonality" (how these critical approaches appear to complement one another) is frequently "*violently imposed*" (p. 51), he emphasises that we can "neither give up the need and desire for reconciliation nor ... openness to new, unexpected, contingent ruptures. Reconciliation/Rupture is the space in-between the new constellation – the space that is the *topos* in which critique thrives" (p. 319).

'The Other' has something to say to us to contribute to our understanding. The title of my thesis highlights how 'other' literatures and 'other' critical discourses on those literatures have been excluded, silenced and pushed to the margins and emphasises that it is only through an "engaged encounter with the Other" – with what is "other and alien (even in ourselves)" – that we can "further our own self-understanding" (Bernstein, pp. 66-67). Levinas' logic here, as Bernstein expresses it, is "both/and" rather than "either/or", but it is not the 'logic' in which "all differences and oppositions are ultimately reconciled. In short, there is both sameness and radical alterity, symmetry and asymmetry, identity and difference in my relation with 'the Other'" (p. 72). In Taylor's words, I have sought to look at the "interesting insights" that lie in between,<sup>8</sup> and to re-read these critical approaches towards a more comprehensive, critical and hopefully more interesting discussion of their insights.

This is to conclude this thesis. However, I am also aware of how appeals to dialogue contain their own hidden violences, and hence the value of a rhetoric of disruption. The work of Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein plays an important role in this regard (although Lesnik-Oberstein moves from disrupting the critical dialogue on child literature to finally seeking to opt out of that dialogue altogether), in a similar way that feminist theory has been important in unsettling broader theory. Hence, in the spirit of my argument for a dialogic approach *and* a rhetoric of disruption, for searching out complementarities *and* tensions, reconciliations *and* ruptures, I want to say something

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8 *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, pp. 10-11.

about my own investment in 'the child' (aware that my 'comprehensive and critical' reading cannot be innocent).

In arguing for a more comprehensive and critical account of language and meaning, ethics and politics, and 'the child' and children/'the reader' and readers, I am also arguing for a more critical adult investment in the concept of 'the child'. It might therefore appear that I am implying that this is a more positive, or perhaps in Stephen's words, a more "humane", investment – that is, a more liberating investment in 'the child'. This begs the question whether what lies behind my *critical* approach is yet again a privileging of the concept of a 'critical adult commentator', and yet again a concept of a more 'liberated child reader', a child reader that is liberated in the way I want him or her to be liberated in order to buttress my own argument and position.

In accepting that adults always want something from the concept of 'the child', this is perhaps what I want but I also want to be *critical* about what I want and to think against/disrupt the closures of my own argument, consistent with the theoretical stance I have outlined.

To close, what I really want here is not to privilege the concept of a 'critical adult commentator' but to privilege a *critical concept* of adult commentators and, similarly, not a concept of a 'more liberated child reader' but a more *liberated concept* (or more *critical concept*) of child readers. This is not to play semantic games and nor is it, as I have been trying to stress, on one hand, the pretext for a limitless indeterminacy of meaning or, on the other hand, to lead us out to some objective, final meaning.

What we have is human freedom (the openness of the ethics/politics of freedom) *and* human responsibility. We cannot "escape responsibility, decision, and choice" and the "problem", as Bernstein highlights it ("a problem for which there cannot be any final or permanent 'solution'") is to "live this perpetual uneasiness in a way which we 'gesture in opposite directions at the same time', where we keep alive the distance of questioning and are prepared to act decisively 'here and now'" (p. 215).

The point of this thesis has been to map out a dialogic approach – although one that is always undercut by a rhetoric of disruption – and to move towards a more (self)questioning, critical and comprehensive child literature criticism. The terms 'child literature' and 'child literature criticism' therefore serve the difficult task of both *critique* and *continuing the conversation* about the genre and its criticism.

## Appendix A

### Alan Garner and Roald Dahl: Major Authors of Contemporary English Language Child Fiction: 1960–1991

This appendix outlines the approach used to identify Alan Garner as the most critically discussed and acclaimed author of English language child fiction and Roald Dahl as the most popular author of English language child fiction over the last thirty years (1960–1991).<sup>1</sup>

#### Garner

Garner's child fiction has attracted high critical interest and while, as I have discussed in the main body of this thesis, critics tend to disagree about what constitutes his 'best' work (that published before or after *The Owl Service* [1967]), most agree that his work is significant.

As a first step, I prepared a list of award-winning child fiction spanning the years 1960–1991 to establish a core group of acclaimed authors. The two most prestigious and long established English language child fiction awards are the John Newbery and Andrew Carnegie Medals.<sup>2</sup> Since 1936, the Carnegie Medal has been awarded annually to the author of an "outstanding book for children, written in English and published in the United Kingdom during the preceding year". (The award is not confined to British citizens.) The Newbery Medal has been awarded annually since 1922 to the "author (US citizen or resident) of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in the US during the preceding year".<sup>3</sup>

Over two hundred authors of child fiction have been awarded or honoured under the Carnegie and Newbery Medals over the last thirty years (I have not included the

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1 This period was taken as a representative one in that it marks the publication date of Garner's first book, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), and the publication date of Dahl's last book, *Minpins* (1991; posthumous).

2 Garner's *The Owl Service* was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 1968 and *Elidor* was an Carnegie Honour Book in 1966. Dahl's books have not been awarded or honoured under the Newbery or Carnegie Medals.

3 See Blythe-Jones, *Children's Literature Awards and Winners*, pp. 46–47 and pp. 130–131 respectively. For a history of these awards, see Barker, *In the Realms of Gold: The Story of the Carnegie Medal*, and Linda Peterson and Marilyn Solt, *Newbery and Caldecott Medals and Honor Books: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982). Other major awards for child fiction, such as the Randolph Caldecott Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal, are awarded for child book illustration and are therefore not relevant to this study. There is also a prestigious international award, the Hans Christian Anderson Medal (Garner's work was highly commended under this award in 1978), which recognises authors of both English and non-English language child fiction.

lengthy list of these authors<sup>4</sup>). In order to determine which of these authors had received the most critical attention, I counted the number of critical essays published on each author's work over the period January 1960–December 1991. There were three ways of approaching such a survey:

- \* to review major journals in the field of child fiction and count the number of essays, published over the sample period, on each of the award-winning child authors (an endeavour beyond the scope of this study);
- \* to use a bibliographical source such as the journal *Children's Literature Abstracts* which lists (on a quarterly basis) essays of criticism on child fiction, arranged by author, published in various periodicals.<sup>5</sup> The *Abstracts* have been published since 1973 (essays published during part of the sample period – 1960 to 1972 – are therefore not covered); or
- \* to sample the most comprehensive and up-to-date bibliographical references on child literature criticism, such as Linnea Hendrickson's *Children's Literature: A Guide to Criticism*, ed. Rachael Fordyce (Boston, Mass: GK Hall & Co, 1987),<sup>6</sup> which lists critical essays on child fiction arranged by author (essays published during part of the sample period – 1988 to 1991 – are therefore not covered). Other reference sources, such as Suzanne Rahn's *Children's Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of the History and Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981) and Virginia Haviland's *Children's Literature: A Guide to Reference Sources* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1966; and *Supplements* 1972 and 1977), are dated and much more limited in scope than Hendrickson's publication but have been included for comparison.

I adopted a combination of the last two approaches. The latter approach – the use of bibliographical references like Hendrickson's – will fill in the missing years between 1960–1972 when the *Abstracts* were not published. Similarly, the *Abstracts* will fill

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4 *The School Librarian* (UK) lists each year's Carnegie medal and honour books. Similarly, the *School Library Journal* (US) lists each year's Newbery medal and honour books. See also Barker, *In the Realms of Gold: The Story of the Carnegie Medal*, for a listing of medal and honour books up to 1985, and Association of Library Service to Children, *The Newbery and Caldecott Awards: A Guide to Medal and Honor Books* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1993) for a listing up to 1993.

5 *Children's Literature Abstracts*, published by the International Federation of Library Associations, consists of abstracts of essays about child literature which have appeared in periodicals from Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada and continental Europe. Essays are cited from a wide range of child literature journals, journals of education and librarianship, major newspapers and general interest periodicals.

6 Hendrickson lists essays from periodicals, journals and books across a similar range to *Children's Literature Abstracts*.

in the missing years between 1988–1991 that Hendrickson does not cover. Of primary interest, however, will be if both sources indicate the same trends.

The result of this research is set out below. Only those awarded authors who have had more than three critical essays, books or chapters in books written on their work have been listed. This includes all citations by *Children's Literature Abstracts* and Hendrickson, except for non-English language publications, doctoral dissertations, essays written by the authors on themselves, interviews with authors, and essays of criticism published pre-1960 and post 1991. Multiple essays on one author collected together in a book or journal were counted as one entry.

Garner clearly emerged from this large field as the most critically discussed and acclaimed child author of the last thirty years.

*Survey of Critical Essays on Carnegie and Newbery Award Winning  
and Honour Book Authors of Child Fiction: 1960-1991*

Author	Citations Literature Abstracts	Hendrickson	Rahn	Haviland
Alan Garner	26	29	6	1
Patricia Wrightson	24	7	-	-
Katherine Paterson	16	10	-	-
Ursula K Le Guin	15	22	7	1
Lucy M Boston	14	13	2	2
Margaret Mahy	14	-	-	-
William Mayne	12	11	3	-
Mollie Hunter	12	5	-	-
Penelope Lively	12	6	-	-
Susan Cooper	12	5	-	-
Beverley Cleary	11	4	-	-
Richard Adams	10	8	3	-
Jan Mark	10	4	-	-
Lloyd Alexander	10	2	-	-
Rosemary Sutcliff	9	16	4	5
Ivan Southall	9	11	1	-
Leon Garfield	9	9	-	-
Joan Aiken	9	8	1	1
Betsy Byars	9	7	-	-
Diana Wynne Jones	9	1	-	-
Virginia Hamilton	8	10	1	-
Nina Bawden	8	8	-	-
Philippa Pearce	7	10	2	1
Isaac Bashevis Singer	7	6	5	-
Penelope Farmer	7	5	-	-
Bernard Ashley	7	1	-	-
K. M. Peyton	6	10	1	-
Natalie Babbitt	6	6	-	-
Cynthia Voight	6	2	-	-
Gene Kemp	6	1	-	-
Jan Needle	6	-	-	-
Scott O'Dell	5	8	-	1
William Steig	5	8	-	-
Robert C. O'Brien	5	3	-	-
Helen Cresswell	5	4	-	-
Madeleine L'Engle	5	3	-	-
Peter Carter	5	1	-	-
Paula Fox	4	8	-	-
John Rowe Townsend	4	5	-	-
Nancy Willard	4	4	-	-
Arnold Lobel	4	-	-	-
James Watson	4	-	-	-



## Dahl

Dahl is clearly the most popular author of English language child literature over the period 1960–1991. Although it is not possible to obtain precise sales figures for Dahl's child books, the following anecdotal evidence indicates the extent of his popularity:

Dahl's sales way exceed any other authors on the Puffin list, and a couple of years ago his sales notched 2 million copies in one year out of the UK. This does not include sales in the US or sales of any of his translations<sup>7</sup>

in China, [Dahl's] *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has just been issued [1990] in what may be the largest first edition printing in history – two million copies<sup>8</sup>

[in 1988], 16 of [Dahl's] children's titles sold a total of 1.6 million in the UK alone. The highest selling adult author in England, thriller novelist, Dick Francis, has a backlist of 27 titles which last year sold less than one third of that, a 'paltry' 500,000 in total<sup>9</sup>

Dahl's *Rhyme Stew*... [was] the best-selling children's book last Christmas [1990] ... [and] four more of Dahl's titles featured in the top ten, one of which was first published as early as 1982<sup>10</sup>

Dahl, the world's most successful children's author ... Last year [1989], Dahl sold 2.3 million books in paperback in Britain alone. *Matilda* ... recently broke publishing records by selling 500,000 copies in paperback in 10 months. It has also sold 200,000 copies in hardback;<sup>11</sup>

[*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*] still sells to excess of 100,000 copies a year – some eighteen years after it was first published. Other Dahl books on the Puffin list ... have a similar standing as 'permanent children's classics'. [Puffin] expect the most recent, *The Twits*, to have sold 200,000 copies by the end of its first year in paperback. No other Puffin author can match this. Not merely is Dahl 'at the very top of Division One', there's what [Puffin] calls 'a quantum difference' between him and his closest rivals.<sup>12</sup>

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7 Correspondence between myself and Liz Attenborough, Publisher, Children's Books, Penguin Group (UK) Child Publishers, 7 January 1995.

8 Brian Appleyard, "Writer as Popular as Rock Star", *The Canberra Times*, 31 March 1990, p. B7.

9 Gail Cork, "Roald Dahl and the Art of Taking the Mickey", *The Australian Author*, 21, No. 2 (1989), p. 10.

10 Joseph Connolly, "Pied Piper of Child Tales", *The Times*, 27 February 1990, p. 18.

11 Greig, "Roald's Gift Makes Him Dyslexic Kid's Dahl-ing", p. 7.

12 Chris Powling, "Farewell to the Big Friendly Giant", *Book for Keeps*, 66 (1991), p. 10.

## Appendix B

### List of Child Books by Alan Garner and Roald Dahl

#### Garner

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen	1960
The Weirdstone of Brisingamen (rev. ed.)	1963
The Moon of Gomrath	1963
Elidor	1965
Holly from the Bongs: A Nativity Play	1966
The Old Man of Mow	1967
The Owl Service	1967
The Hamish Hamilton Book of Goblins (ed.)	1969
Red Shift	1973
The Breadhorse	1975
The Guizer: A Book of Fools	1975
The Stone Book	1976
Tom Fobble's Day	1977
Granny Reardun	1977
The Aimer Gate	1978
Fairy Tales of Gold (in 4 volumes)	1979
The Girl of the Golden Gate	
The Golden Brothers	
The Princess and the Golden Mane	
The Three Golden Heads	
The Lad of the Gad	1980
Book of British Fairytales	1984
A Bag of Moonshine	1986
Jack and the Beanstalk	1992
Once Upon a Time	1993

## Dahl

James and the Giant Peach	1961
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	1964
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (rev. ed.)	1973
The Magic Finger	1966
Fantastic Mr Fox	1970
Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator	1972
Danny, The Champion of the World	1975
The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More	1977
The Enormous Crocodile	1978
The Twits	1980
George's Marvellous Medicine	1981
Revolting Rhymes	1982
The BFG	1982
Dirty Beasts	1983
The Witches	1983
Boy: Tales of Childhood	1984
The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me	1985
Going Solo	1986
Matilda	1988
Rhyme Stew	1989
Esio Trot	1990
The Vicar of Nibbleswicke	1991
The Minpins	1991

## Appendix C

### Contemporary Critical Discourse on Alan Garner's (Adult) Literature: Neil Philip's *Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner*

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a further group of critics on Garner's work, represented most notably here by Neil Philip, who have chosen to treat his books as adult literature. "Everything Alan Garner has published has been published for children", Philip states, and continues:

[t]his simple fact has seriously distorted criticism of Garner's work; I will not, except in this preface, be much concerned with it. This book is about Alan Garner the writer, not Alan Garner the child writer. I have written it because Garner seems to me to be a very considerable talent, whatever his readership ... This contention can only be proved by subjecting his work to the sort of scrutiny one would accord John Fowles, Angus Wilson or B. S. Johnson.<sup>13</sup>

There are a number of other critics whose approach to Garner's work broadly resembles Philip's. In fact many contemporary critics of Garner's work adopt Philip's stance, which in itself is indicative of the appeal of Garner's work to adult readers. Although these critics do not always dismiss the child audience quite as categorically as Philip, they approach Garner's work as though it is adult literature. Hence, for such critics the title 'children's literature' is merely a label; no attention is paid to the 'children's' component of the term. Maria Nicolajeva, for example, in her insightful reading of Garner's *Red Shift* makes no reference to the child audience or to what the book's status as a 'children's book' might mean, despite the fact that her essay (like many of the other critical essays on Garner referenced in my bibliography) is published in a journal dedicated to the area of 'child literature'.<sup>14</sup> The point to stress here, as I suggested in Chapter 2, is that there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, as long as such critics keep to the rules they have set themselves. These critics do not imply that Garner's books are not for children at all – and so deny Garner his child audience – but rather choose to approach them as part of adult literature. Their critical approach does, however, call into question the term 'children's literature'.

Given the limited scope of this thesis, it is not my intention to provide a detailed meta-commentary on Philip's and these other critics' discourse. It is of interest, however,

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13     *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner*, p. 7. (Further references will be in the text.) Hunt reviews Philip's book in "A Fine Scepticism: Academics, Children and Books", *Signal*, 36 (1981), pp. 175-181. See also Gillian Spragg's "Review of Neil Philip's *A Fine Anger*", *Use of English*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1982), pp. 81-83.

14     "The Insignificance of Time: *Red Shift*", pp. 128-131.

to mention Philip's comments concerning Garner's first two books (*The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*), the books that he observes, "were intended as children's books" (p. 8). They show "subservience to convention" (p. 12), the plot "is a simple framework for exciting adventure" (p. 23), "the 'eternal fight between good and evil' is a commonplace and overworked theme" (p. 24), there is an "over-reliance on the materials of folklore" (p. 44), and his "dialect seems wooden and stilted" (p. 129). Philip concludes that it "seems unlikely" that Garner's "best future work will be for children" (p. 156). Such comments imply a dismissive attitude towards child literature. Similarly, Carolyn Gillies labels *Elidor* as "the turning point" in Garner's writing because there is "no concession to the childish wish for a happy ending".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Possession and Structure in the Novels of Alan Garner", *Children's Literature in Education*, no. 18 (1975), p. 107 and p. 111.

## Appendix D

### Children, Adults and Society

The obvious differences in critical opinion concerning Garner's and Dahl's child literature point to more fundamental differences in opinion in society in general concerning adult-child relations (both as represented in child fiction and more broadly), the concepts of 'childhood' and 'adulthood', and the complexities of ethics and politics in relation to these concepts.

It is interesting for example that, while the book-centred critics of Dahl's work discussed in Chapter 1 (such as Cameron) and some contemporary critics of Dahl's work (such as Hunt) have both commented unfavourably on Dahl's work, their comments are based on a completely different set of assumptions. For Cameron, Dahl's work was subversive (undermining traditional values) but for Hunt, Dahl's work is conservative (reinforcing those same traditional values). This radically different assessment can in part be explained by the shift in critical opinion over time. Dahl's work has slipped over this period from being considered child-centred by critics like Cameron (aligned with the child audience and undermining traditional values), when an adult-centred approach had critical acceptance (the child book should be aligned with the adult audience and reinforce traditional values), to being considered adult-centred by critics such as Hunt (aligned with the adult audience and reinforcing conservative/traditional values), when a child-centred approach has critical acceptance (the child book should be aligned with the child audience and be progressive in its values). That Dahl's child fiction has been excluded from the canon of 'children' literature' as constructed under *both* critical approaches is of considerable interest.

As this suggests (and to state something of a commonplace), there will always be debate in society over values, as well as debate over the nature of childhood/adulthood and the values that are perceived to be suitable/necessary/natural to that state. There is no final answer as to whether Dahl's child books serve to liberate or repress child readers.

There is insufficient scope in this thesis to explore shifts in the concepts of childhood, adulthood and child literature, and the ethical/political context of these shifts. What I want to do here instead is to list a range of opposing positions taken on Dahl's and Garner's work, childhood and adulthood, and ethics and politics to illustrate the poles between which discussions on these issues are conducted. (It would be easy enough to provide extracts, drawn by way of example from child literature criticism and

studies that touch on the broad subject of children, adults and society, to reflect every one of these positions but in order to summarise I have omitted these.)

Dahl sides with adults against children	Dahl sides with children against adults
Dahl reinforces conservative (repressive) values	Dahl challenges conservative (repressive) values
Dahl's work is repressive	Dahl's work is liberating
Dahl encourages children to be aggressive and cruel	Dahl encourages children to safely explore aggression and cruelty
Dahl directs his criticism towards adult power and authority (anarchic)	Dahl directs his criticism towards adult power and authority <i>abused</i> (democratic)
Dahl is anti-child	Dahl empowers the child
Dahl reinforces adult authority	Dahl challenges adult authority
Dahl's work reflects adult hypocrisy	Dahl's work exposes adult hypocrisy
Dahl's work is didactic	Dahl's work is immoral
Dahl's heroes are passive, obedient and compliant	Dahl's heroes are powerful and independent
Garner's work is not written <i>to</i> the child	Garner's work is written <i>to</i> the child
To learn 'good', the child should not be exposed in literature, to the 'bad' (to problematic aspects of life - racism, violence, cruelty etc)	To learn the 'good', the child should be exposed, in literature, to the 'bad' (to problematic aspects of life - racism, violence, cruelty etc)
The child should be exposed to the ethically/ politically progressive to learn the 'good'	The child should be exposed to the ethically/ politically regressive to learn the 'good'
The child should be taught conformity to what are generally agreed to be healthy values	The child should be left alone to choose his/her own values on the grounds that we otherwise infringe their freedom
There should be no moral ambiguity for children	There should be no political ambiguity for children
The politics of gender, class and race are irrelevant to the child - these concern only adults	The politics of gender, class and race are relevant to the child - there are a part of the child's life, as well as the adults'
Issues such as sexuality and violence are irrelevant to the child - concern only adults	Issues such as sexuality and violence are relevant to the child - a part of the child's life, as well as the adults'
Children should be protected from some elements of life	Children should be acclimatised to all elements of life
Children are weak and vulnerable - they are naturally bad and must be prevented from acting on their impulses	Children are weak and vulnerable - they are naturally good and only have to be assisted to act according to their nature
Children are primitive - they are without adult (moral) restraint	Children are primitive - they are natural and free of adult corruption

Child lives are sheltered and protected by responsible adults

Children are blank slates - rational thought and moral development should be encouraged

Children are not as capable as adults of making reasoned choices among intellectual and moral concepts

For their own good, children should be insulated from certain kinds of knowledge and influences - should be shielded from too direct contact with full range of adult activity - dangers of exposing child to pernicious ideas outweigh dangers of restriction

The period of childhood is shortening, it is under threat

Child lives are not always sheltered and protected by responsible adults

Children have natural wisdom - they should be encouraged to reach their own intellectual and moral conclusions

Children should be encouraged to make comparisons among intellectual and moral concepts freely available to them

For their own good, children should not be insulated from certain kinds of knowledge and influences - such things are part of child's life as well as adult's - dangers of restriction outweigh dangers of exposing child to pernicious ideas

Childhood is being liberated

Shutting down various elements on either side of this list might be viewed from the perspective of the opposing position as being *either* properly protective of children and as upholding certain traditional values *or* overly repressive of children and as upholding conservative values – as being either liberating of children and upholding progressive values or as damaging of children and traditional values. As I suggested earlier, however, there is no final answer to such debates.

These strongly oppositional stances obscure (shut down) the range of positions that lie in the space between such polarised views. Such stances are also frequently contradictory, able to be interpreted as both reinforcing and undermining the assumptions upon which they are based. To regard Dahl as *either* "too blatant an advocate of old-fashioned morality"<sup>16</sup> and therefore not blatant enough an advocate of more progressive values<sup>17</sup> *or* to regard Dahl as completely liberating in his progressive ethics/politics and therefore heathily subversive of more conservative values, is to close down a range of other interesting critical insights on his work (as I discussed in Chapter 7).

To simply reverse these oppositions/hierarchies is also to obscure other interesting critical insights. Culley, for example, suggests that the commonly perceived sexism in Dahl's *Matilda* should be regarded as anti-sexist: "[b]y giving the villain bald sexist statements that the reader will be able to recognise from experience, Dahl successfully

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<sup>16</sup> Petzold, "Wish-fulfilment and Subversion", p. 191.

<sup>17</sup> Culley, for example, states that "[t]here must be ... a place for literature addressing 'contemporary themes': racism, child abuse, handicap, sexism ... Dahl's books largely ignore these areas ... It would have been a great contribution if Dahl, using his own highly original approach, had included more plots that touched upon these areas in his books", "Roald Dahl: 'It's About Children and It's For Children' – But is it Suitable?", p. 69.



ridicules this kind of everyday sexism" (p. 64). However, as other critics have pointed out, simply exchanging one opposition for another does not solve anything, for "[i]f we assume that such stories are good for children, then we must believe one of the following: [that] we must first teach children the outmoded traditional role models in order to unteach them; or [that] children *already* know these role models".<sup>18</sup> Hence, as other more searching critical approaches reveal, Culley's anti-sexism has not rid itself of the other term of the opposition, sexism. His approach is not as liberated as it appears.

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<sup>18</sup> Nodelman, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, p. 172.

## Appendix E

### Overview of Jacqueline Rose's Major Conclusions: The Construction of the Child and the Nature of Language

#### Construction of 'the child'

Rose argues that the implications of the philosophical writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau for thinking about child fiction "have not been fully recognised" (p. 8). Our contemporary notion of 'the child', she maintains, is still firmly grounded in the ideas of Locke and Rousseau, ideas centering on the supposed purity and innocence of 'the child' ('the child' as free from the difficulties and divisions of adult life). It is wrongly assumed, Rose suggests, that child literature and its critical discourse have moved away from these ideas. Instead, they have "constantly returned to this moment, repeated it, and reproduced its fundamental conception of the child. Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state" (p. 8). Under this philosophy, 'the child' is seen to have a direct and privileged access to an existence that we have lost, an existence that bypasses the imperfections of language, complications of sexuality and problems of social inequality: "[t]he child is rendered innocent of all the contradictions which flaw our interaction with the world" (pp 8-9). Through 'the child', we can recapture this lost existence and keep it "finally safe" (p. 9). The tendency to avoid the issues raised here by Rose has been evident in some child literature discourse, as I have discussed.

From Locke, Rose suggests, comes the notion of the child having direct access to the 'real' world, access that allows the child to bypass the difficulties of language. Locke maintained that words were imperfect and stressed the need to hold the written word as closely as possible to the immediacy of the visual image. Rose also points to "Rousseau's preoccupation with an original form of language", a preoccupation which "goes hand in hand with his interest in nature and the child. Innocence of the child and of the word ... Together they form something of a holy alliance which runs right through children's fiction to this day" (p. 49). Rose highlights that while both Locke and Rousseau are alert to the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, they seek to "by-pass this aspect of language *through* the child. Language is imperfect (Locke) or degenerate (Rousseau), which implies the possibility of some perfect, or original and uncontaminated form of

expression" (p. 47).<sup>19</sup> Rose points to interesting parallels between Rousseau and Garner here (I will briefly consider Rose's comments in Chapter 7).

Rose also highlights "our inability to recognise the dislocation which [Freud] operated on our conception of childhood" (p. 10). In most discussions of child fiction that make their appeal to Freud, for example,

childhood is part of a strict developmental sequence at the end of which stands the cohered and rational consciousness of the adult mind. Children may, on occasions, be disturbed, but they do not disturb us as long as that sequence (and that development) can be ensured. Children are no threat to our identity because they are, so to speak, 'on their way' ... Their difference stands purely as the sign of just how far we have progressed. (p. 13)<sup>20</sup>

It is the "constant pull" of the unconscious "against our seeming identity" and "its threat to the idea that we have neatly picked up and resolved everything that came before on the way to where we are now" that Rose argues we have ignored from Freud (pp. 13-14). The "contradictory and inconsistent ways that childhood appears in analysis, undermines any notion of a straightforward sequence and throws into crisis our relationship to meaning itself. Meaning is not simply there – it is built up" (p. 18).

Symbolism and biography are identified by Rose as the two forms of Freudian analysis traditionally associated with child fiction: "[b]oth presuppose a pure point of origin lurking behind the text which we, as adults and critics, can trace". However, in child literature criticism, as she points out, "the child seems to become implicated in the process. It is as if the child serves to sanction that concept of a pure origin because the child is seen as just such an origin in itself. The child is there, and the original meaning is there – they reinforce each other" (p. 19). As discussed in Chapter 3, this tendency was evident in some of the approaches to Dahl's work drawing on Freudian psychology (see in particular my discussion of West's "Regression and Fragmentation of Self in *James and the Giant Peach*"). By way of example, Rose also points to the "strange complicity"

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19 Summerfield also comments on "the persisting influence of Locke and Rousseau in [the] insistence that children would learn more effectively through contact with immediate experience, through direct observation and through talk", *Fantasy and Reason*, p. 128.

20 Rose is critical, for example, of Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment, The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, for perpetuating such a view. (See also my similar comments in Chapter 3 on West's commentaries on Dahl.) The "purpose of the fairytale", according to Bettelheim, Rose observes, "is to allow the child that early instability or instance of disruption in order to ensure that any such instability will, in the last analysis, be more effectively removed" (pp. 14-15). The child can then resume the path to adulthood. Such a view is also perpetuated in those child stories that revolve around a child's emotional disturbance healed through the fantasy life that the child creates for his or herself. At the end of the story, the child renounces his or her 'childish' fantasies and returns to 'normal' – that is, back on the path to rational adulthood. (See, for example, Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie was There*: "Brooding lonely Anna, a foster child" meets a mysterious (imaginary) girl called Marnie. "Marnie becomes Anna's perfect friend, and though she finally vanishes for good, she has helped Anna to make real friends". Publisher's summary, London: Collins, 1979.)

between the "archaic status of the fairy tale" and the "idea of the child as a true, unconscious recipient of its meaning" (p. 19). This tendency has also been evident in a number of the critics' commentaries I discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 (see in particular my discussion of Merrick's *The Nightwatchmen* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as Books to be Read to Children").

It is not the purpose of this thesis to go over Freudian theory in order to critique Rose's re-reading of Freud from a theoretical perspective. Such a complex major study is beyond the scope of this thesis. As I have suggested, however, Rose's critique clearly has relevance to some of the child literature criticism discussed in previous chapters. The influence of Locke and Rousseau on the conceptualisation of 'the child' and 'childhood' has also been much discussed by critics and literary historians, and there is general agreement with Rose about the form this conceptualisation took and the extent of its influence on past child fiction.<sup>21</sup>

### Nature of language

The "problem of language", Rose claims, "the idea that language might *be* a problem - is the dimension of psychoanalysis which has been most rigorously avoided in discussions of fiction for the child" (p. 16). She continues:

[L]anguage is not something which we simply use to communicate, as everything in psychoanalytic practice makes clear. Psychoanalysis directs its attention to what cannot be spoken in what is actually being said. It starts from the assumption that there is a difficulty in language, that in speaking to others we might be speaking against ourselves, or at least against that part of ourselves which would rather remain unspoken. This includes, necessarily, speaking *to* children. (p. 16)

"Our relationship to language", Rose concludes, "is no more fixed and stable than our relationship to childhood itself" (p. 17). Rose is clearly influenced here by psychoanalytical/post-structuralist theories, drawing on the work of Derrida and Jacques

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21 See, for example, Townsend, "[t]he influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on English-language children's literature is comparable with that of Locke ... Rousseau was all for naturalness and simplicity, the language of the heart, the ideal of the Noble Savage. Where better to find and cherish an unspoiled nature than in the child?", *Written for Children* (1983), p. 40. See also Wallace, "our thinking in regard to the category of 'the child' is largely unchanged from the time of Locke", "Towards a Theory of the Child-Subject", p. 295. Similarly, Inglis states that the "secondary histories" agree on the view that "the value and meaning of childhood began to change noticeably through the eighteenth century ... the familiar names of Locke [and] Rousseau ... serve as landmarks of the new direction of key social meanings", *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction*, p. 81. For discussions on Locke, Rousseau and child literature, see George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood*, (London: University of London, 1966); Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*; Summerfield, *Fantasy and Reason: Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century*; Jackson, *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children's Literature in England from Its Beginning to 1839*; and Pickering, *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth Century England*.

Lacan concerning the unstable nature of language.<sup>22</sup> In discussions on child fiction, Rose observes she repeatedly comes across the demand "that there should be no disturbance at the level of language" (p. 20), no ambiguity, no indication that language is something other than fixed and stable, and no "playing with language – in the sense of undercutting its transparency and ease" (p. 40). These characteristics define for Rose a 'classic realist' perspective on language. (See my discussion of Rose's position here and problems with aspects of that position in Chapter 1.)

As discussed in detail in previous chapters, the dominance of certain book-centred critical norms supports Rose's argument but, as the work of Stephens and Hunt and the increase in the publication of metafictional child books demonstrate, this situation is changing. Similarly, Rose observes that the issue of intention and address is "normally ruled out of bounds" by critics and that "children's fiction relies, for its continuity and untroubled existence" on this suppression (p. 21) but in recent years a number of critics have examined this issue in detail (such as Wall and Stephens).

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<sup>22</sup> Lacan, like Derrida, draws on Saussurian theory to highlight the unstable nature of language and the similarly unstable nature of the unconscious: slips of the tongue, wordplay, dreams, memories, misunderstandings, misreadings, repressed material, gaps and so on show up the workings of the unconscious. The unconscious sends fragmented and distorted messages to the conscious mind. The slippage between the unconscious and conscious mind therefore resembles the slippage between signifier and signified. The unconscious, Lacan maintains, is structured like language. The subject is similarly unstable – constructed/produced in language, the subject cannot be a unified/stable entity.

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